

MORMON WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES  
WITH SAME-SEX SEXUALITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study examines 28 Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality through the use of in-depth interviews. Twenty-three women who have experienced same-sex sexuality comprised the primary group of participants from whom findings were analyzed. Additional findings from a theoretical sampling of 4 heterosexual women and 1 transgendered woman who identifies as lesbian are also presented. Participants identify as members or former members of The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Half of the sample continues to hold a Mormon identity and the other half have dis-identified with the religion. Well-educated, Caucasian women who were raised in the Church comprise the majority of the sample. Findings present a synopsis of each woman's experience and thematic results. Major themes include sexuality, religion, spirituality, family, community, coming out, mental health, and reconciling. Findings suggest that family and community play a major role in the process of identity development. Women identify with their religious identity to differing degrees and same-sex sexuality may or may not pose a threat to this identity. Most women experienced some conflict between their religious identity and experience of same-sex sexuality. Many women struggled with issues of guilt, shame, and self-hatred. However, women who challenged their religious identity prior to questioning their sexual identity did not experience the same level of conflict between their religious identity and sexual orientation. Several women experienced challenges to their religious

identity not related to their same-sex sexuality. Some women rejected their religious identity and still struggled with accepting their sexuality. Mormon women appear to go through traditional sexual minority identity development stages (including awareness, exploring, accepting, and then internalizing a sexual minority identity). Religious identity and sexual identity are two different, although potentially interconnecting, identities. Cultural factors and internalized homophobia from a Mormon upbringing appeared to impact the sexual identity formation process. Reconciling sexuality and spiritual/religious beliefs is an on going process. This process may be revisited throughout a woman's lifespan as she considers new experiences and re-evaluates prior choices. The women in this study showed incredible resilience in the face of traumatic experiences. Implications for counselors, social supports, families, ecclesiastical leaders, and women who experience same-sex sexuality are presented.

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To the women who shared their stories and to all the women in my life who have loved me and helped me on this journey.



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose of the Study**

People define themselves in many ways. They may, for example, define themselves by their beliefs, personality characteristics, connections to others, cultural affiliation, involvement in groups, religious beliefs, and/or intimate relationships. These defining aspects of self become part of a person's identity. Identity provides a personal framework for our individual consciousness (Wilber, 2000). Identity is the answer to the question, "Who am I?"

A person holds multiple identities. Not all identities hold the same salience to the core concept of self. For example, a religious identity may hold greater influence over the understanding of self than a professional identity. While a person could hold various identities, not every component of human existence is used as a basis for identity. Sexuality and spirituality are part of the human experience, regardless of whether or not one chooses to base their identities on either component. If something challenges an aspect of identity that one holds as an essential definition of self, that person's understanding of world or self can crumble.

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the phenomenon that occurs when a person experiences conflict between aspects they believe are central to their core

concept of Self (i.e., spirituality and sexuality). This research project attempts to expand the knowledge area of intersectionality by looking at how women within a specific religion understand their experience with spirituality and sexuality. To explore this, I conducted a phenomenological qualitative study with Mormon women who experienced same-sex sexuality and attempted to understand how their experiences affected their religious and sexual identities.

### **Background**

Concepts such as spirituality and religiosity or sexual orientation and sexual identity are often confounded; therefore, the terms need to be defined. Spirituality is the personal connection to faith in a universal power or universal connection to other living things (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Spirituality is about personal enlightenment (Hall, 1996). Religious identity is the identification with an established belief system and often includes involvement with a community or organization that shares similar worship practices (Griffith & Griggs, 2001). Religiosity is a dogmatic practice of beliefs (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Religion, depending on the person, may or may not be connected with individual spirituality. I use the terms “Mormon Church,” “LDS Church,” and “the Church” interchangeably throughout this paper in reference to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Sexual orientation is the sexual, affectional (otherwise known as romantic orientation), and/or emotional attraction to specific genders. Orientation is viewed as a continuous construct with various degrees of attraction toward the same- and/or other-sex (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). Sexual identity is a self-assigned label used to

represent an individual's sexual orientation. A sexual minority identity (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual) acknowledges nonheterosexual sexuality and can refer to exclusive or nonexclusive attractions toward the same-sex. Same-sex sexuality will be used in this dissertation as an inclusive term to represent all aspects of sexuality oriented toward someone of the same sex and in reference to both a same-sex sexual orientation and a sexual minority identity within the female participants of this study.

Many religions consider and constrict sexuality. Religious beliefs provide the context and meaning with which to understand sexuality. To understand how someone experiences sexuality, one needs to know what and how their family and community taught about sexuality and how she perceives her own sexuality.

Traditional beliefs in Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions condemn same-sex sexuality and view acting on thoughts or desires to be a sin. The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or Mormon), a self-identified Christian religion, is no different. In order to understand a Mormon worldview, a few of their doctrinal beliefs should be explicated. The LDS Church teaches that it is unique from all other churches and religions in that they are the one and only True Church on this earth, divinely established by God. Second, Mormons believes that eternal salvation is dependent upon marriage performed within their temple to an other-sex partner. For example, a leader and Apostle of the Church stated, "Our eternal destiny—exaltation in the celestial kingdom—is made possible only through the atonement of Jesus Christ...and is only available to a man and a woman who have entered into and been faithful to the covenants of an eternal marriage in a temple of God" (Holland, 2007). Not fulfilling this expectation of heterosexual marriage and transgressing against moral proscriptions would

result in the loss of an eternal family and in the denial of returning to God's presence, salvation with exaltation. Dallin H. Oaks (1996), another leader of the LDS Church also considered to be an Apostle, Seer, and Revelator, compared same-sex sexuality to pedophilia and stated that same-sex attractions were impulses that need to be curbed and controlled, and are not to be considered "an identity." The preferred language in the LDS Church when referring to same-sex sexuality is "same-sex attractions" in order not to give "legitimacy" to sexual minority identities (Holland, 2007). The stance of the LDS Church has evolved to consider the behavior of acting on same-sex desires a sin, but does not view a person with such attractions as inherently sinful (Hinkley, 1998).

Mormonism is a growing religion thanks in part to the active proselytizing program. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints claims over 14.4 million members worldwide, 6,229,233 within the United States as of 2012 (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012a). While the headquarters of the LDS Church resides in Utah and a vast portion of that State's population identifies as Mormon, members of the LDS Church live throughout the nation. While impossible to gauge how many Mormon women experience same-sex sexuality, if Mormon women are assumed to be similar to other women in the United States an estimate may be calculated. A random representative sample of America women and men showed that 1.4% to 7.1% of women experience same-sex sexuality in some form (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). The higher number tends to represent women who willingly report any type of same-sex fantasies, affections, desires and/or behaviors and the lower number represents women who identify as a sexual minority. Taken together, this means that potentially

between 87,200 to 447,3000 Mormon women in the U.S. experience some form of same-sex sexuality.

Many women who experience attractions and desires toward other women, and even those who engage in sexual behavior with a female partner, may still identify themselves as heterosexual. Given that the experience of same-sex sexuality does not always lead to a sexual minority identity, other factors must compel a person to reject the normed assumption of a heterosexual identity (Rich, 1980). Factors such as social and cultural values, including spiritual and religious beliefs mitigate sexuality (Greene, 2000; Morrow, Beckstead, Hayes, & Haldeman, 2004).

“Mormon” may represent a strong identity for an individual. According to the teachings of the LDS Church, being a active and identifiable member of the religion is the most important identity a person can hold. Salient in every aspect of one’s life, a Mormon religious identity influences personal conduct to social interactions. Religion represents both a social identity as a personal identity (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). A Mormon identity often includes involvement in the Mormon community, which involves weekly communal worship on Sunday as well as non-Sunday social and service activities. Sexual identity affects a woman’s relation to the religious community because accepting a sexual minority identity may means giving up or being rejected by the religious community. She risks losing a connection to others while at the same time having conflict with beliefs that normally would provide solace and meaning to life (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008).

The LDS Church’s definition of a traditional family (i.e., a married heterosexual couple with children) translates into stanch beliefs about gender roles within that family.

Mormon doctrine considers gender an essential and eternal characteristic of the spirit or soul created in a spirit world prior to being born into a physical body in this world (Oaks, 1995). Similar to other conservative Christian religions, the Mormon Church teaches women that their most important role and identity is that of being a mother and wife to a heterosexual partner whom they married in a temple ceremony that makes the marriage eternal (Mahaffy, 1996). Acknowledging same-sex sexuality and adopting a sexual minority identity is perceived as rejecting the belief in the importance of eternal heterosexual marriage and children from that union because non-heterosexual marriages cannot be conducted in the temple. The Mormon Church defends heterosexual marriage (performed either secularly or in the temple) by claiming, “By definition, all same-sex unions are infertile, and two individuals of the same gender, whatever their affections, can never form a marriage devoted to raising their own mutual offspring” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2008).

While individuals may privately struggle with personal identity, political and ideological battles affecting human rights are being fought at the national level. In response to perceived threats to their religious and moral beliefs, the Mormon Church has given substantial support in recent political events for “anti-same-sex” civil marriage initiatives (Campbell & Monson, 2003). The Mormon Church recently created controversy with their involvement in passing California’s Proposition 8, a marriage amendment which constitutionally defined marriage as the union only between one man and one woman (Cohen, Bastian, Greenstreet, Volz, & Pearson, 2010). A number of Mormon member suicides have been associated with the Mormon Church’s stance on same-sex sexuality and the Mormon Church’s involvement in marriage initiatives

(Committee for Reconciliation, 2009; Matis, Matis, & Mansfield, 2004). Given the context of their own religious community fighting so fervently against the legitimacy of any person having a positive sexual minority identity, their experience with same-sex sexuality created too great of an internal conflict with their religious identity. They choose death as their best option. This study attempts provide a better understanding of the experience of religious and sexual conflict in order to better assist those who personally experience this dilemma.

### Theory

Intersectionality and feminist theory guide this research. Intersectionality stresses the importance of multiple, interacting identities (Murphy, 2009). Religious and sexual identities do not develop in isolation to one another. Traditional identity development theories consider the development of only one identity without acknowledgment that an individual holds multiple identities. A compilation of separate, distinct identities (gender, religion, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, nationality, etc.) do not make up our concept of Self. Rather, all of these identities interact to create a unique experience that cannot be boiled down to qualities of singular identities (Ibid). Therefore, in order to understand an experience one must look to the intersection of two or more identities because holding both identities creates a different experience than holding one and not the other. For instance, essential differences exist between a Mormon woman's experience with same-sex sexuality, a Mormon woman's experience with other-sex sexuality, a non-Mormon woman's experience with same-sex sexuality, and a Mormon man's experience with same-sex sexuality.

Feminist theories have long posited that researchers need to consider multiple identities and how those identities interact with each other (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Feminist theory considers gender as an important construct used in organizing our understanding of reality (Creswell, 2007). Women and men have different experiences because of the gendered nature of society and the oppression of women in patriarchal cultures. Feminist research seeks to understand women's experience and how those experiences are shaped by gender (Kvale, 1996). Feminist thought challenges the pure essentialism of gender characteristics. Rather, people are viewed as performing a socially constructed gender role (Butler, 1989).

In contrast to feminist theory, the doctrine of the LDS Church teaches that gender is an essential characteristic and that the sexes are complimentary and necessary to one another (Packer, 1993). Talks given by the patriarchal leadership of the LDS Church demonstrate the belief in ideal gender roles and offer a specific script to follow (Holland, 2005; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996). Consequently, same-sex sexuality can existentially challenge a Mormon woman's reality because it contradicts the concept of the essential heterosexual eternal family. Her religion tells her that she cannot be Mormon and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Queer.

The Mormon identity includes the belief in only one religious Truth. The doctrine of the LDS Church teaches a worldview of essentialism and positivism, that one can find and confirm this true reality. In stark contradiction with the essentialism of Mormon doctrine, stands feminist constructivist thought. Identities are not fixed, but are socially constructed and open to change (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). No



absolute Truth exists. Forces such as social, cultural, and religious values construct the reality that one experiences (Ponterotto, 2005).

Mormon religious belief and feminist constructivist thought position themselves in direct contradictory worldviews/paradigms, which seeming incompatible. For many devout members of the LDS Church, both cannot be true at the same time. Many LDS members have the belief that a Mormon identity and a sexual minority identity are irreconcilable (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Brzezinski, 2000; Moran, 2007). Often, people unbendingly believe that one has to choose between these worldviews and identities.

### **Research Questions**

Women who experience same-sex attraction cannot exist with integrity within the LDS Church while simultaneously not practicing or behaving according to the tenets of the religion. For instance, the LDS Church demands abstinence in all relationships outside of a legal heterosexual marriage). Consequently, devout women who acknowledge same-sex attraction immediately experience a feeling of a dualistic split and pressure to choose either one's spirituality or sexuality over the other with no hope of integration. In order to understand this experience, this research project explored the following research questions:

- What are Mormon women experiences with same-sex sexuality?
- How do Mormon women reconcile same-sex sexuality with their religious identity?

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

I employed qualitative methods to answer these research questions. Qualitative research offers the best method to examine a complex phenomenon when attempting to provide a thick description and understanding of a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative methods can uncover how people make meaning of their experience (Haverkamp & Young, 2007; Marrow, 2007) because life cannot be understood through numbers or artificially created categories, only through lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). I conducted a phenomenological study using in-depth interviews to obtain information about women's experiences with same-sex sexuality, in order to gain understanding about how Mormon women experience the phenomena of same-sex sexuality with the goal to uncover the essence of experience shared among participants as they attempt to reconcile conflicting identities (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Potential Impact and Limitations**

This research provides greater understanding of the experience of identity conflict between spiritual and sexual dimensions of identity. This adds to the body of knowledge in sexuality studies, in addition to informing the burdening research area of intersectionality and fill in missing gaps surrounding gender in the context religious and sexual identity conflict. Results may benefit mental practitioners, individuals living through the experience, individuals providing support to someone else who experiences same-sex sexuality, and the general religious community that provides the context of the identity conflict. Given national attention to same-sex marriage and teen suicides related

to real or perceived sexual minority identity, policymakers could also gain from further understanding of this phenomenon. Results are limited to those who chose to participate which should not be viewed as representative of all Mormon women who experience same-sex attractions. Results may have limited transferability to other populations or to similar populations with different gender, religious, or national identities. Nevertheless, this study provides greater understanding of a significant number of women who experience this type of identity conflict.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review first focuses on identity theory and the multifaceted nature of identity, including the individual and community components. Next, I discuss how spirituality and sexuality form religious and sexual identities respectively. I then focus the effects of sexual orientation and gender on sexuality. Since identities do not exist in isolation, I examine the concept of intersectionality and conflict between two identities. Finally, same-sex sexuality will be considered within the context of the Mormon Church.

#### **Identity**

Identity develops throughout the course of life. Identities form within specific contexts, dependent on historical and cultural factors (Erikson, 1980). One, for example, could not identify as a Christian before the establishment of Christianity. The historical and cultural setting also gives value to certain identities and stigmatizes others. Identity forms based on social interaction as society validates or invalidates aspects of ourselves (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). This creates an additional burden when accepting an identity would result in prejudice or discrimination. People determine their identity, at least in part, based on social comparisons and who an individual believes she is most like. In other words, people try to match their understanding of self with available culturally

established identities (Diamond, 2006). As people try to make sense of their experience, they look to others with similar experiences and determine whether the identity that other people hold could also apply to them (Erikson, 1980).

As social beings, humans hold both personal and social or community based identities. An identity denotes belonging to a particular social group who has similar and significant characteristics (whether that be sexual orientation, religious beliefs, nationality, race/ethnicity, age, etc.). While people personally relate to an identity, the identity has a meaning to a larger group and tends to conform to social expectations. Community identities provide membership to a group of people that have a similar individual identity. Social connection and belonging contribute person's over-all sense of self (Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002).

Identities do not represent standardized scripts to which all people who accept that identity conform. Societal stereotypes may obscure within group, or individual, differences in a shared community identity (Erikson, 1980). For example, the stereotype of a person with same-sex sexuality may include the assumption of gender non-conformity (i.e., the flamboyant gay male or the butch lesbian). If personal experience does not match the cultural stereotype of an identity, a person may feel confused about whether that identity applies if she only identifies with some, but not aspects of the identity. Part of identity development means understanding what that identity signifies and means personally outside of ascribed stereotypical attributes. A study of sexually questioning youth showed that many experienced conflict because of the belief that if they accepted a sexual minority identity that meant they would also have to be gender variant. The youth in this study confounded sexual identity and gender identities.

(Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, 2000). This example shows not only the need to counter stereotypes in identity formation, but also the complexity of identity due to the multiple dimensions.

### Multiple Identities

One identity status cannot fully encompass the complexity of human identity. Our “identity” consists of multiple identities creating a whole self-identity (Worthington et al., 2002). Some identities appear fixed, such as race, and some appear changeable, like one’s occupation. However, researchers debate which identities constitute essential and unchangeable characteristics and which constitute social constructed and changeable characteristics. People cannot change the color of their skin, but the concept of race is socially constructed (Ferre, Lorber, & Hess, 1999). Given the plethora of religions and conversions to different religions, it would appear that religion is not fixed and yet most religious systems center their beliefs on the concept of an unalterable truth. Beliefs about essentialism may introduce conflict into identity formation. Different segments of society send messages that some identities, such as those based on religion or sexual orientation, can (and should) change because of seemingly inherent conflict with the other identity. To an individual, both identities may feel like essential and unchangeable components of her core identity.

Discrete identity categories are artificially created as a human heuristic and do not represent the complexity involved in identities which are created based on multiple aspects (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Identity development literature tends to focus on the formation of only one identity and do not consider that other identities forming in

conjunction may affect the identity development process. Researchers have created distinct identity development theories based on sexuality or on faith (Cass, 1979; Fowler, 1991; Troiden, 1989).

In order to understand how spirituality and sexuality interact, I will first look at the constructs of spirituality and then sexuality and how these essential components of human experience create the basis for identity (Daniluk, 1993; Yarhouse, 2004). The expression of sexuality and spirituality and their importance to an individual's sense of identity vary with specific socio-historical contexts and unique personal experiences (Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009). The values and beliefs of a society at a specific time and place create the structure in which individuals express spirituality and sexuality. Sexuality has always been part of human existence, but sexual identity is a relatively recent creation (Baumeister, 2000; Blackwood, 2000; Foucault, 1978). The earliest recorded history of humankind holds evidence of spirituality; however, rather than being an identity itself, spirituality most often expresses itself through a religious identity. Religion then becomes central to self-concept and identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010).

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality and religiosity are separate, although interconnected, constructs. Religion and spirituality had analogous definitions until recently when the constructs diverged (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Spirituality represents the internal sense of faith and connection with some universal force as uniquely defined by an individual (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Religiosity represents the belief in the tenants of a specific religion and the subsequent practice of that religion. A person can be spiritual and not religious, or

piously religious and not spiritual; although, not many people may disagree with this statement as they view their religiosity as an expression of their spirituality.

Fowler (1991) proposed a delineated stage model of faith. In this model, a person moves from faith comprised of magical beliefs and reliance on authority figures, to literal belief in religious dogma and uncritical practice of religion, to a universal conception of faith that does not exclude people due to different beliefs. As a person moves through these stages, the focus shifts from uncritical religious practice to interpersonal relationships within a religion and an acknowledgement of tension between individuality versus group membership. Only a few ever reach the final stage of faith that includes a critical reflection on identity and allows universal acceptance of other worldviews. Faith does not follow in line with religious identity. Faith changes from reliance on religion to reliance on personal spirituality. In fact, conflict with religious authorities or dogmatic beliefs/practices that exclude certain populations may spur an individual to move to a higher critical stage of faith that is not dominated by unquestioned religious beliefs.

### Religious Identity

As previously stated, some people consider spirituality and faith to be synonymous with religiosity, the degree to which they practice their religion (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Religious identity can include the belief that one's own religion is "the Truth" and that adopting this specific religious identity has eternal consequences (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). People outside of a specific religious context may not understand the strength of the identity. Researchers and practitioners need to view religion and spirituality from the practitioner's understanding and experience because



outsiders' tend to view dogmatic religious beliefs and practices from a different worldview, which produces judgments and lack of understanding of those faith systems in which they do not participate (Berkel, Armstrong, & Cokley, 2004).

Research has correlated positive benefits with religion. Identification with a religion can provide health and mental health benefits (Hunter, 2010). Religion provides a framework for understanding the world and creates meaning for experiences (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008). Religion provides connection with a community of fellow believers. Part of the benefit from religious participation comes from being part of the in-group. The in-group status, and resulting benefits from sharing a community identity, becomes threatened when a person deviates from the religious prescriptions (Lease et al., 2005). A change in a religious identity would affect one's relation to the faith community—a community that is often times a strong source of support in a person's life (Hunter, 2010).

All major religions moralize sexuality and have sexual proscriptions. This may protect the dilution of religious practice by maintaining religious communities by intermarriage with others of the same faith. This creates a religious stake with whom people marry, and thus with whom they have sexual relations. Before discussing the moral conflict which same-sex sexuality poses for an individual with a conservative religious identity, I will first discuss sexuality outside of the moral framework of religion.

### **Sexuality**

Humans are and have always been sexual beings; however, sexual identity as a construct recently developed (Diamond, 2006). Prior to the nineteenth century with the

advent of concepts such as heterosexuality and homosexuality, people did not consider sexuality an identity in and of itself (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Homosexual behavior always existed, but a person did not identify by whom they sexually desired. People defined themselves by their familial roles, with women identified by their roles as wife and mother (Rust, 2002).

### Sexual Orientation

Researchers have yet to prove the origins of sexual orientation. Evidence exists for both biological (Mustanski, Chivers, & Bailey, 2002) and cultural factors (Baumeister, 2000; Blackwood, 2000). Culture may affect sexual orientation in one of two ways. Sexual orientation could either be a complete social construction formed through socializing forces in a specific culture or the specific cultural context could direct inherent (biological) sexualities into socially constructed sexual identities (Blackwood, 2000). The most realistic explanation involves a combination of interacting biological and environmental factors. This has left open the debate about the ability to change sexual orientation (APA, 2009; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004; Spitzer, 2003). Sexual identity may represent a socially constructed idea, but that does not mean that sexual orientation can change. Rather sexual orientation appears fairly stable and it is behaviors, thoughts, and identity that can change. How a person expresses their orientation is funneled through cultural constructs, which explains consistent evidence of same-sex sexuality and variation in outward manifestation same-sex sexuality in different cultures (Blackwood, 2000).

Since the beginning of modern sex research, researchers have viewed sexual orientation on a continuum, most commonly conceptualized on the Kinsey Scale—a 7-point scale ranging from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual with gradients of bisexuality in between (Diamond, 2006). The multifaceted nature of sexual orientation makes it difficult to categorize. The construct of sexual orientation includes various dimensions of sexuality, such as sexual attraction, sexual behaviors, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, life-style preference, and self-identification. Each of these dimensions also exists on a continuum (Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999). Sexual orientation does not correlate consistently with sexual behavior or identity (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008).

### Sexual Identity

Sexual identity represents a person's sexual orientation. Sexual orientation includes sexual feelings, thoughts, and behaviors toward people of the same or other gender. Sexual identity takes those feelings, thoughts, behaviors, and values and assigns an identity label (Foucault, 1978). A person can experience aspects related to an identity, but not accept that identity. Many more people experience some form of same-sex sexuality (sexual behavior, attractions, or desires) than identify as a sexual minority (Laumann et al, 1994). Does a person still qualify as LGB, if they do not label themselves as such (Diamond, 2008)? Historically, numerous cultures have existed with same-sex sexuality without the available identity categories of LGB (Blackwood, 2000). Many researchers consider it inappropriate to apply current sexual identity labels to individuals who engaged in same-sex behavior in other societies.

Sexual tendencies have not changed through human history, but the opportunities to express those desires have changed (Rust, 2002). Sexual identity developed as social roles changed due to industrialization. As societies shifted from agricultural to urban living, survival no longer depended on the family unit. Women gained more political and economic power and could survive without attachment to a husband or father (Peplau et al., 1999). Marriage, and by extension romantic relationships, changed from fulfilling role bound responsibilities, to expecting partners to fulfill each others' emotional needs (D'Emilio, 2002). Given new expectations of primary relationships people, understandably, began to take into account their sexual, romantic, and emotional preferences and question which gender best meets those needs. The result has been a creation of sexual identity categories.

Currently, our society polarizes people into either homosexual or heterosexual, with some acknowledgement of bisexuality, depending upon the gendered object of their desire (Worthington, 2004). Society still considers heterosexuality the norm and considers sexual minority identities a deviation from this norm (Rust, 2002). Given this dualistic view of sexuality, research has focused on same-sex sexuality identity development (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989) separately from heterosexual identity development (Hoffman, 2004; Worthington & Mohr, 2002). The development of sexual identity, however, may differ in experience due to societal condemnation of same-sex sexuality, than a different developmental process (Diamond, 2003a).

Sexual identity development theories do not take into account these nuances or the social environment in which women experience same-sex sexuality. The first sexual minority identity models explained sexual as a linear develop which assumed that

individuals went through a certain series of steps, usually between three to six stages, to eventually create a healthy “out” identity (Klein et al., 1985). The major models all had common themes of first becoming aware of attractions, exploring those attractions, accepting the identity label, and then internalizing that identity. Other researchers have criticized these models of confounding personal identities with community identity and involvement (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989).

Studies show positive health and psychological benefits when people who experience same-sex attractions develop and accept a sexual minority identity (Hunter, 2010; Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2006). Research suggests that individuals who have synthesized an LGB identity and have disclosed their identities to others have a higher level of self-esteem (Beals & Peplau, 2005). Acceptance by a sexual minority community provides psychological benefits by buffering against larger societal discrimination (Hunter, 2010). One survey of lesbian women shows that social support for identity provided psychological well-being defined by self-esteem, life satisfaction, and decreased or absence of depression (Lease et al., 2005). This does not deny the great difficulty in forming an LGB identity amidst discrimination and minority stress, reasons why individuals with same-sex sexuality may never accept an LGB identity (APA, 2009).

While both woman and men experience positive effects from an integrated identity, sexuality identity has been studied mainly from the male perspective. It would be remiss to consider sexual identity without also considering the intersection of gender. Gender roles are connected to sexual scripts resulting in different sexual socialization for women and men (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Gender differences, whether caused by

biological or cultural factors, appear in timing of first same-sex sexuality experiences, exclusivity of attractions, and stability of sexual identity (Diamond, 2008b; Savin & Diamond, 2000).

### Sexuality and Gender

Research conducted with samples of gay men provides the strongest support for biological causes of sexual orientation. This biological data does not represent women to the same extent (Peplau et al., 1999). Some studies show that prenatal hormones or genetic factors may influence the development of same-sex sexuality in some women, but the links appear to play a minor role and do not fully explain same-sex sexuality in woman (Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau et al., 1999; Veniegas & Conley, 2000). The weaker genetic link may explain why more men than women identify as exclusively homosexual and why women's sexuality appears to be more open to cultural influences.

Biological factors may appear to play less of a role in women's sexuality because of the confounding variable of gender, which is also culturally conditioned. Socialization plays a major role in gender and in the meaning given to sexuality. Current western society views gender as dichotomous. One's culture defines gender and gender roles while connecting sexuality to that gender and the enactment of that gender (Foucault, 1978). We use gender roles to define the parameters of sexuality. Gender frames social relations and provides a guide to how gendered individuals understand and relate in the gendered world (Ridgeway, 2009).

Society expects the female gender to experience attractions only toward men. Women who are attracted to other women violate their gender role (Reynolds & Pope,

1991). Historically researchers assumed similarities lay between individuals with similar sexual orientations rather than similar genders. Researchers assumed lesbians' gender orientation fell toward the masculine end of the continuum, rather than the feminine. They also assumed that they could extrapolate studies about gay men to lesbian women since both experienced same-sex sexuality. Researchers no longer view women as sexual inverts, some form of masculinized female in direct contrast to the heterosexual woman (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) and it now appears that lesbian women share more experiences heterosexual women, including aspects of gender nonconformity, then they do with men, including men who experience same-sex sexuality (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000).

Blackwood (2000) looked at various occurrences of same-sex sexuality in women from nonwestern cultures and argued that culture produces sexuality. Different cultures provide different meanings and opportunities for expression of same-sex sexuality. Cultural and anthropological data show that female same-sex sexuality can vary across the lifespan depending upon the cultural context that justifies same-sex sexuality at certain points in the life or under certain circumstances (Baumeister, 2000); the more permissive a culture, the more likely that people will express gender atypical behaviors such as same-sex sexuality (Greene, 2000).

The cultural context appears to affect women's sexuality and sexual expression to a greater extent than men (Blackwood, 2000; Peplau et al., 1999). Society socializes women with a different understanding of desire. While society encourages men to be virile, women's sexuality is still considered somewhat taboo. Society views female desire as a passive, reactionary emotion that responds to male desire. Women are

generally not taught to identify and distinguish their desires (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Society disregards sexuality for its own sake in women. Rather, women are viewed, and subsequently found, to be more romantically or relationally oriented (Daniluk, 1993). Society allows women greater expression of emotional intimacy and socializes women to value relationships. Research has suggested that desire can develop in women who experience a love or a romantic relationship first, which may contribute to flexibility of sexual orientation due to the formation of an emotional attachment with someone of the same gender that then leads to the development of sexual desire (Diamond, 2004).

### **Sexual Fluidity**

Research on women's sexuality suggests that sexuality is less rigidly polarized between exclusive homosexuality and exclusive heterosexuality than men's (Kinnish, 2003; Kinsey & Institute for Sex Research, 2010). Theories of sexual fluidity suggest that women have the ability for flux in their sexuality, which could result in a change (or multiple changes) in their orientation and/or identity during a lifetime (Diamond, 2008). Sexuality is malleable to situational and cultural influences and may change with changing circumstances; thus, women's erotic response may be situation dependent (Baumeister, 2000; Diamond, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Women's sexuality, their attractions and desires, may result from contextual circumstances or characteristics of the partner not associated with gender (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000), as evidenced by identity being formed on the basis of intimacy and/or romantic, social, or political ties that are not based on just sex (Rust, 2000). Men appear more driven by sexual urges compared to women's relational orientation driven by intimacy and love (Diamond,



2004). The differences in gender could be biological or it could be that a patriarchal and homophobic society controls more tightly men's fluidity. Future studies should explore this more. Regardless of why, a general difference does appear between the genders at the group level, which may or may not exist within individual women.

Diamond (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of 89 women where she asked about sexuality and identity. She found that some women changed their identity after initially adopting a sexual minority identity. The identity change aligned with sexual behavior subsequent to a previous interview. As women had more sexual experiences, those experiences sometimes contradicted their previous sexual identity label. Many of the women who changed their identities eventually choose to either reject an identity label all together or choose a label, like queer, that could encompass all of their experiences.

### **Sexual Identity and Gender**

Identity development poses different challenges to men and women for both biological and cultural reasons. For women more than men, sexual behavior, desire, and identity do not highly correlate with each other (Kinsey & Institute for Sex Research, 2010). Women may have same-sex desires and even act out same-sex behaviors without forming a sexual minority identity (Rothblum, 2000). Women may also identify as lesbian and still have sex with males.

The sexual identity development stage models were developed on gay men with the assumption that sexual orientation was an early appearing trait that would remain stable across the lifespan. However, there appears to be a difference in the experience of

women. Research on women shows that same-sex desires can occur at any age without prior experiences (Edwards, 2000) and that experiencing same-sex sexuality does not necessarily result in a stable sexual-minority identity (Diamond, 2003b; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Rothblum (2000) found that women's coming out stories do not fit traditional stage models of sexual identity development. Rather than a specific end stage, the identity development occurred through the lifespan and identity status could change and was more likely to change than a man's sexual identity.

Does this mean that women are less likely to reach a healthy identity resolution? I believe this is doubtful. Women's sexual development is merely different than men's and should not be expected to conform to male's development. Cultural and biological factors are present in both men and women's sexual identity development, but the influence of these factors is different. Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) found that lesbians felt they had more control than gay men over their sexual orientation. Lesbians were less likely to regard their sexual orientation as beyond their personal control. Factors such as personal characteristics, exclusivity of the attractions, and the socio-cultural environment play a role in identity development (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). Gender differences in amount of sex hormones, such as testosterone, and the cycling influences of estrogen, progesterone, and oxytocin also play a major role in sexuality and mate-bonding (Brizendine, 2006).

For these reasons, linear stage theories of stable identity development do not fit women (Rust, 2002). Identity is not a static point to be reached, but may change along the life course (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000). Sexual questioning is a process,

not an outcome. Women may repeat this process multiple times throughout a life course and the process may not result in a minority identity (Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

The majority of women who experience same-sex sexuality also report heterosexual attractions and identify as heterosexual (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). If sexual behavior, identity, and desire are not highly inter-correlated for women (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000), then how and when do desires or behavior become the basis of identity? Friedman and Morgan (2009) found that factors that predicted level of sexual identity integration among 156 LGB youth included social support and negative social relations. Adolescent females have been shown to rely on social supports, such as family and friends, when attempting to understand their sexual identity. Girls with same-sex feelings appear to be less likely than girls with other-sex feelings to talk to their friends and/or parents when attempting to understand their sexuality and when they did they found it less helpful (Rothblum, 2000), understandable in a society that presumes heterosexuality (Butler, 1999). For individuals who come from a conservative religious background, their social supports may be unlikely to provide positive support for a non-heterosexual identity.

### **Intersectionality**

Research in intersectionality looks at the cross section of two or more identities (Murphy, 2009). The intersection of spirituality and sexuality will affect both the religious and sexual identity development of an individual (Brown, 1989). Christian lesbian holds a different significance and lends to a different experience than either the identities of Christian or lesbian on its own. There is not, however, one universal

experience for any identity. There are multiple realities for individuals experiencing same-sex sexuality created by the socio-cultural, historical, and religious background of each individual (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008).

The society, culture, or historical time period create the setting in which identities are valued or devalued. One may hold multiple oppressed identities, such as woman and sexual minority in a heterosexist, patriarchal culture. Integration of some socially devalued identities occurs with little, if any, community support (Brown, 1989). Minority stress and stigmatization play a role in identity development and are one of the causes of stress experienced by religious individuals with same-sexuality (APA, 2009). Accepting a sexual minority identity opens a person to discrimination and prejudice, regardless of personal religious beliefs.

To understand the intersection of spirituality and sexuality, one must come from a multicultural perspective and understand the community and culture of an individual. Religion represents a cultural background (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Religion and spirituality may be core identity components and are not easily changed for those within that belief system (Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). Sexual minorities have also developed their own communities and culture (Greene, 2000). Being part of the sexual minority community and sharing the collective identity may buffer the negative effects of stigmatization (APA, 2009).

The APA (2009) urges mental health practitioners to value all aspects of identity and not unduly influence an individual in conflict toward accepting or rejecting one of their identities. One cannot privilege one identity over the other (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Aligning with one identity means that a person will have to internally repress the

other conflicting identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). One study showed that ethnic minorities who identify as a sexual minority experience conflict within the different communities in which they participate. Study participants reported having to deny aspects of themselves in either community, such as denying their sexuality in their ethnic community or ignoring their ethnicity in the White-dominated LGB community (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Identity forms amidst multiple oppressions (Brown, 1989; Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

### Intersection of Religious and Sexual Identities

Many Judeo-Christian religious identities preclude the legitimacy of a sexual minority identity. Not all Judeo-Christian denominations accept this view and certain denominations do consider themselves welcoming and accepting of sexual minorities. This, however, represents a recent phenomenon. Traditional and conservative denominations continue to consider same-sex sexuality a sin. Christianity historically splits spirituality and sexuality into distinct dichotomous categories of body and soul that cannot be integrated, often in conjunction with highly valuing the soul while denigrating the body (Tsomo, 2009).

Religions have historically attempted to control human sexuality, whether by defining appropriate partners or manners of sexual expression (Foucault, 1978). Conservative Judeo-Christian religious beliefs, as defined by a literal interpretation of the Bible and/or adherence to traditional values, conflict with sexual expression outside of one man and one woman who are legally married. They consider any deviation from sexual propriety, including same-sex or other-sex fantasy/thoughts/acts, a sin.

Acknowledging and/or acting on sexuality in a manner outside of religious dictates would then conflict with the religious identity.

Due to inherent conflict in beliefs about sexuality in a conservative religion, one identity may attempt to take precedence over the other because the two are seen as unable to coexist (Balkin, Schiosser, & Levitt, 2009). People with same-sex sexuality who practice within conservative denominations that condemn homosexuality experience conflict as a norm because their religious traditions view the development of a sexual minority identity as a rejection of the original religious identity (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). The rigidity with which highly religious individuals hold to beliefs about morality makes it difficult to incorporate opposing views (Glassgold, 2008). They then cling to the option of denying sexuality in favor of their religious identity (Hunter, 2010).

Both religious and sexual minority identities have positive benefits when considered in isolation, however, intersections of these identities may negate the benefits one could receive from these identities individually. Participation in a conservative religion will diminish psychological benefits from a synthesized sexual minority identity because of a lack of social support (Swann & Spivey, 2004). The positive health benefits of religion may not hold for LGB individuals given the condemnation they hear about themselves in mainline conservative religions (Greene, 2000).

### Identity Conflict and Resolution

A positive self-identity has many benefits; however, achieving a positive identity when two identities seem to inherently conflict presents difficulty. What happens when two core identities conflict? A threat to identity results in distress. The degree of distress

depends on the salience of the identity (Rust, 2000). Identities considered central to an individual's core identity will create greater distress when threatened (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985).

Conflicting identities create cognitive dissonance. The level of dissonance is dependent upon the degree of identification with the particular identity (Festinger, 1957). Thereby, if a woman views her religious beliefs and identity as practicing the "One True" religion, having experiences that go against her worldview will cause greater conflict than if her religious beliefs did not connect to her core sense of self. The conflict can create an identity crisis because the way one previously defined oneself has become incompatible with a possible new identity and the commitments to values necessary to maintain that identity (Lease et al., 2005).

Research has documented the distress created in individuals with conflicting spiritual and sexual identities. Same-sex sexuality can disrupt a conservative religious individual's core sense of self, values, meaning, purpose, and self-worth (APA, 2009). The negative impacts of religious and sexual identity conflicts include suicidal ideation (Russell et al., 2000), depression, alienation from family and culture (Mahaffy, 1996); loss of meaning (Morrow et al., 2004); unhappiness, loneliness, isolation, high-risk sexual activity, substance abuse, feelings of not belonging, fear of being rejected, self-denial, religious doubt, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Hunter, 2010).

The theory of cognitive dissonance states that one cannot remain in dissonance forever and that humans seek to eliminate dissonance by reducing the importance of the conflicting beliefs, acquiring new beliefs, or removing the conflicting attitude or behavior

(Festinger, 1957; Ysseldyk et al., 2010). People who view their sexual orientation as fixed may change their religious identity, which would result in a reevaluation of the meaning and experience of their spirituality. One may opt to relinquish their religious membership. Changing religious identity can change one's identity as a whole because it changes the way that a person perceives their reality and the way that they live their life (Lease et al., 2005). To accept a sexual minority identity may mean a loss of a religious community's support and a subsequent loss of religious beliefs including a meaningful worldview (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Even if one does not wish to change their religion, accepting a sexual minority identity may result in rejection from that culture and community (Greene, 2000). For this reason, people who embrace a sexual minority identity often turn to the LGBT community for support. Many people within the LGBT community hold negative views and attitudes about religion because of the general condemnation they have received from religious institutions. While religion and spirituality are separate constructs, negative religious experiences can impact spirituality (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). The result may be a devaluation of spirituality and a disconnect from this essential human experience.

People who view their religious orientation as fixed may foreclose on a sexual minority identity (Ermann, 2004). For a conservative Christian, experiencing any form of same-sex sexuality represents more than a deviation from the "norm," it is potentially sinful or immoral. Although mental health professional associations have stated that sexual orientation is a natural and normal variation that should not be pathologized, religions continue to condemn non-heterosexual orientations (Mahaffy, 1996; APA, 2009). Since some religious communities identify as welcoming or affirming and do not



consider sexual minorities sinful, changing religious denominations would be one option at integration (APA, 2009).

Some religious individuals, who do not feel able to change religions or religious beliefs, seek sexual reorientation (APA, 2009). Reorientation (also known as reparative or conversion) therapy promotes the belief that all individuals have the ability to change from a same-sex sexual orientation to heterosexuality (Baumeister et al., 1985).

Reorientation therapies theorize that the individual did not identify adequately with their same-gender parent and the resolution is to reinforce segregated gender roles. Mental health and professional organizations generally agree that reorientation therapies appear to cause more harm than good and should not be promoted by mental health professionals (APA, 2009). Those who underwent reparative therapy report that their orientation did not change; rather they changed their identity, spirituality, and/or meaning of sexuality (APA, 2009; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004). Most research in this area lacks sufficient female participants (APA, 2009).

The APA (2009) recently created a task force to address Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation. An extensive review of the literature on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE) suggests that while an individual might be able to change identity or behavior, however, sexual orientation itself is unlikely to change. The task force recommends that mental health professionals use affirmative therapy to help individuals in conflict explore, develop, and integrate a congruent identity without pressure directed on a particular outcome. Devaluing either identity lessens psychological well-being; therefore, all identities need to be considered and explored. The developmental process includes crisis, mourning, re-evaluation, identity

deconstruction, and growth. The goal is to seek identity synthesis rather than identity foreclosure or compartmentalization.

The resolution of conflict will be unique to an individual's well-being (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008) and to the individual social, personal, and historical context (APA, 2009). Which identity someone decides to favor or develop needs to be taken in the consideration of environmental and sociopolitical factors of the individual's life. What this means is that there is no stable identity status that needs to be reached. Individuals with same-sex sexuality may never develop a sexual minority status. Identity is not static and identities may be continually re-examined with additional experience. Identity development is not a linear process that occurs in isolation. Identities interact at different points in time and the meaning of the conflict and the reconciliation may vary or change depending upon the different circumstances of that moment (Brown, 1989).

### **Same-Sex Sexuality and Mormonism**

Academic and clinical settings have historically dismissed religion and spirituality as immature or oppressive (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Because of which, researchers have conducted little systematic research in this area. To date there are few studies which focus specifically on Mormons with same-sex attractions (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Brzezinski, 2000; Goodwill, 2000; Moran, 2007). In research studies and in anecdotal reports (Schow, Schow, & Raynes, 1991), Mormon participants initially experience same-sex sexuality as impossible to reconcile with their religious identity.

The LDS Church denies sexual-minority identities as a legitimate identity. Bishop Keith B. McMullin, Second Counselor in the Presiding Bishopric of The Church

of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been reported saying, “If someone seeking your help says to you, ‘I am a homosexual,’ or, ‘I am lesbian,’ or, ‘I am gay,’ correct this miscasting. Heavenly Father does not speak of his children this way and neither should we. It is simply not true. To speak this way seeds a doubt and deceit about who we really are...a son or daughter of God” (Winters, 2010).

The conflict between sexual and spiritual identity includes factors such as attraction, desires, and behavior (Baumeister et al., 1985). Interestingly, the LDS Church separates out feelings, thoughts, and behaviors from each other. The LDS Church takes the stance of forgiving of same-sex feelings, encouraging change in thoughts, and condemning behavior (Oaks, 1995). The Church tells its members, “You serve yourself poorly when you identify yourself primarily by your sexual feelings. That isn’t your only characteristic, so don’t give it disproportionate attention” (Holland, 2007).

Rich (1980) characterizes U.S. society as promoting compulsory heterosexuality and the Mormon Church re-emphasizes this. The LDS Church issued a “Proclamation to the World” stating that heterosexual marriage between one man and a woman is a divinely established relationship (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Church leaders have stated, “Without the family, there is no plan; there is no reason for mortal life” (Beck, 2009). Family, of course, is defined as heterosexual families.

Gender roles are often conflated with same-sex attraction. The LDS Church has very clear beliefs about distinct and separate gender roles (Seidel, 2006). Church leaders stated, “What we call gender was an essential characteristic of our existence prior to our birth” and that Satan uses the tool of same-sex attraction to confuse what it means to be male and female (Holland, 2007). For the Mormon religion, primary identity centers on

gender and for women the roles of wife (to a man) and mother (Seidel, 2006). A Mormon woman must reject this socialization in order to develop a sexual minority identity (Morrow & Beckstead, 2004).

Same-sex relationships threaten this structure and the theological dogma built upon it. During the past few decades as same-sex marriage rights have entered the political area, the LDS church has actively fought against them and refer to their efforts as “defending” marriage (Campbell & Monson, 2003; Fox, 2003). No wonder that individuals who identify as Mormon experience conflict with same-sex attraction.

Few research studies report on the experiences of this population; however, at least four in-depth studies have been conducted. Brzezinski (2000) examines at the general experience of Mormon men with same-sex attractions. Two studies focus on Mormons experiences with conversion therapy, one sampling mostly men (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004) and the other sampling only women (Moran, 2007). Finally, Anderton (2010) presents a phenomenological research study, similar to the study of this paper, with same-sex attracted Mormon women. Each study gives insight into Mormons’ experience with same-sex sexuality,

Brzezinski (2000) conducted a grounded-theory study on 21 Mormon men. She constructed a model denoting the process of identity integration. Mormon men first experience of same-sex attractions resulted in conflict. They experienced a downward spiral alternating between religious devotion and guilt/shame regarding their attractions, which led some to negative coping behaviors and acting on their same-sex attraction. Once the men reached the end of their spiral, they either choose to identify with their religious or sexuality identity at the exclusion of the other identity. The men in this study

noted that they did not want to be forced into one of only two outcome categories, but rather wanted a more integrated identity option.

Beckstead and Morrow (2004) conducted a study with 50 Mormons (participants included 45 males and 5 women) who underwent conversion therapy. The participants reported that they underwent conversion therapy due to the need to experience congruence with the heterosexual messages that they received from their religious community, family, peers, and general society. They sought conversion therapy because of the importance of the LDS Church in the understanding of their identity. Both opponents and proponents of conversion therapy noted positive benefits, such as realizing that they were not alone in their struggle and learning a less condemning explanation for their experiences. For opponents of conversion therapy, the short-term benefits did not outweigh the long-term negative impacts such as:

False hopes and disappointments, increased self-hatred, decreased self-esteem, increased denial and emotional distress, dehumanization and being untrue to self, increased depression and suicidality, lost loves and friendships, wasted time and resources, a slowing down of the “coming-out” process, decreased capacity for same-sex intimacy, and lost faith and spirituality. (p. 671)

Moran (2007) interviewed 21 Mormon women who experienced same-sex sexuality and either underwent conversion therapy or discussed their conflict with their ecclesiastical leaders. All reported a struggle in reaching congruence with their identity and felt as though there was no place for LGB peoples in the Mormon Church. Regardless of the sexual identity (heterosexual or LGB) that they held, they reported that feelings of same-sex attractions did not disappear. Some significant methodology flaws exist in this study, such as interpretation without sufficient data or understanding.

Anderton (2010) interviewed 10 Caucasian women, born into and raised within the Mormon religion either in Utah or Idaho, who experienced same-sex attraction. Her results indicated that women struggled with figuring out and identifying themselves as a same-sex attracted, struggled with the LDS religion and culture, and struggled with coming out to others in their lives. All but one participant in her study embraced their sexual minority identity and rejected their religious identity. Only one participant remained an active and practicing member of the LDS Church. The current study expands on this research by including a larger sample not limited to a specific race or geographical region. The current study also provides expanded descriptions of the phenomenon, rather than focusing on a few themes.

Participants in these studies rejected the idea of being forced into one of two dichotomous categories, Mormon or LGB. Participants wanted space for unique variance in how they resolved their identity without having to sacrifice an important aspect of themselves (Anderton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Brzezinski, 2000; Moran, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

My research study fills in missing gaps in the literature. Research has largely ignored women due to variability in sexual identification and experience that makes them difficult to label for research purposes, and thus resulted in their general exclusion (Diamond, 2008b). Women have a unique experience given the gendered nature of the Mormon Church and the different biological and social influences on their sexuality. This study takes a feminist perspective and considers the experience of women because

the greater abundance of research conduct with men who have experienced same-sex sexuality has created an absence of women's voices.

Consideration should not only be given to how an identity is formed, but why a woman would choose to accept a sexual minority identity amidst a culture of condemnation of such acts. It is more than a matter of choosing a lifestyle. Faced with the potential loss of faith or love, how do women know who they "really are?" It is beyond the scope of this study to determine how much of sexuality is socially determined and how much is dependent upon biological causes that are channeled to pre-established identities. Rather, this study attempts to understand the experiences of Mormon women with same-sex sexuality in the context of religious and community pressure toward heterosexuality.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

This study examined how women who belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, otherwise known as the LDS or Mormon Church, experience same-sex sexuality (which includes thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors). The LDS Church, a conservative self-identified Christian religion, requires strict adherence to rules regarding sexual practices based on fundamental beliefs about gender and morality. The Church forbids members to engage in any form of sexual activity outside of a legal marriage between a man and a woman. Violating the sexual rules results in consequences or the loss of specific religious privileges, such as being able to enter an LDS temple, partaking of the weekly sacrament, or entering into or maintaining eternal family relationships.

Little systematic research has been conducted on this population. Based on a few studies (Anderton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Brzezinski, 2000; Moran, 2007) and anecdotal accounts, it appears that deviating from the dictates of the religious sexual proscription, for either gender, creates internal conflict and struggle. Studies looking at individuals of other conservative faiths attest to similar conflicts and dilemmas (Lease et al., 2005). This study attempted to understand the process of reconciling this conflict and how this process ultimately affects the religious and/or sexual identity of the individual. Reconciling means reducing or eliminating conflict or distress felt because of the two



identities that hold conflicting beliefs. The reconciling process occurs in the present. I use the term “reconcile” to include both attempts to reconcile and reconciliation, while recognizing that women might not reach a permanent reconciled state. Women who feel they have reconciled their feelings towards their identities at one point in time may experience further conflict or distress in future.

This research project sheds light on the experiences of women who deviate from “appropriate” sexuality defined by the LDS Church and presents information to better understand how women reconcile their sexual feelings and/or actions with their spiritual values and beliefs.

### **Paradigm Guiding the Research**

A paradigm is a worldview or set of beliefs that guide how people understand the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Ponterotto, 2005). This phenomenological research project takes an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm informed by the critical ideology of feminist theory. Phenomenology itself has philosophical underpinnings that guide this study and are discussed throughout this methods section.

An interpretivist/constructivist paradigm believes that reality is subjective and that people create the meaning of their experience based on their interpretation of that experience (Ponterotto, 2005). Personal backgrounds based in a specific social/cultural/historical context bias the interpretations (Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Experience, perception, and environment shape reality (Ponterotto, 2005). Every person uniquely experiences the world and then creates meaning from that experience; thus,

looking at the collective experience of people one perceives multiple, equally valid realities, meaning one person's reality does not have more validity than another person's reality (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

Although people construct multiple realities, an universal "reality" shaped by gender and sexual values that form the basis for power relations in society also exists (Morrow, 2007). Individual experiences uniquely shape our identity; however, gendered beliefs and expectations shape the context in which experience emerges.

### Ontology

Ontology defines the nature of reality (Creswell, 2007). Interpretivism states that there are multiple, constructed realities based on individual interpretations of some objective reality (Ponterotto, 2005). A feminist perspective points out that realities are constructed within the dominant structure of gender categories in social relations and identity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Gender, however, is not the only identity category that defines who we are. The experience of gender is itself complicated by the intersection of multiple identities (such as race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, spirituality, etc.). Multiple identities and how they interact, in part, explain the existence of multiple realities experienced by an individual.

### Epistemology

Epistemology defines what can be known about reality (Ponterotto, 2005). In an interpretivist paradigm, one cannot directly observe or measure reality. One can only know the interpretation of reality, a reality constructed in a socio/historical context and

then interpreted by an individual with unique experiences and understandings (Ponterotto, 2005). It is the interpretation that creates multiple realities, all of which are equally valid (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

Epistemology also defines the relationship between researcher and that being researched (Creswell, 2007). The interaction between participant and research co-construct knowledge (Ponterotto, 2005). At the same time, my interpretation of the participants' stories created the final results of this study (Creswell, 2007). I use various qualitative methods, explained later, in order to avoid unduly influencing the results with my own biases.

### Axiology

Axiology defines the role and place of values in research (Ponterotto, 2005). Gender is the center of inquiry in a feminist perspective (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I specifically chose to expand the knowledge of women because they represent a minority of the voices heard in the literature (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Brzezinski, 2000) and their experiences differ from a man's experience (Diamond, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Savin & Diamond, 2000).

I am a feminist and hold values of collaboration and non-exploitation of those who chose to participate in this search for knowledge (Morrow & Smith, 2000). I recognize the power that I hold as the researcher and attempted to minimize the power relationship inherent between a participant and myself by viewing participants as the experts of their experience (Creswell, 2007). In line with these feminist principles, phenomenological studies view participants as co-researchers who are as interested in

knowing and discovering the nature of phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Women wanted to participate in this study because they want to understand and help others understand what it is like to be a Mormon woman with same-sex attractions.

While I held the goal to not unduly influence the results with my experiences, that does not mean that I viewed the phenomenon without any structure. Feminist theory postulates that an androcentric and heterosexual perspective dominates research and the understanding of sexuality (Brown, 1989). The patriarchal nature of the Mormon religion in which women's sexuality developed must be noted. Women's same-sex sexuality challenges assumed gender roles. Mormon women experience same-sexuality in an androcentric and heterosexual religion. The LDS Church only allow men to hold Priesthood Power, which also provides men with higher levels of leadership positions within the Church. Women have access to this power only through their husband (Oaks, Oct. 2005).

Those both within and outside of the Mormon Church often criticize the gender segregation in leadership and perceived value of the different genders. Feminist theory looks at power relations and tends to have emancipatory aims (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). While I hope that participation in this study empowers women through the sharing of their story, I have no preconception or value toward what that empowerment should look like. I do not think that all women must "come out" or abandon their practice of religion. I do not think that women who choose to remain in the Mormon religion should be viewed as oppressed. I acknowledge their choice and power in making that decision and I honor their decision as right for them. Not all of those who chose to participate will feel the same way about others' decisions. I do hope that

understanding this phenomenon will influence the culture in which same-sex sexuality is experienced in order to ameliorate negative environments. Hopefully, this study will influence those who make policy decisions that affect same-sex relationships to provide greater understanding about how policy affects a woman's personal life.

## **Research Design**

### **Phenomenology**

I conducted phenomenological study to explore Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality. A phenomenological study seeks to understand an experience and what that experience means to those who experience it. The outcome of a phenomenological study provides a comprehensive description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the phenomenon is the experience of same-sex sexuality for Mormon women.

According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology sprang from philosophical theory first promulgated by Husserl about people's relationship to reality. Reality does not merely exist because humans have consciousness, rather our consciousness is directed toward a specific object and our conscious interaction with the object creates the reality that we experienced (Wertz, 2005). People, as subjects, experience a phenomenon, the object, either through direct interaction with the object or interacting with the object in their mind. Their experience with the phenomenon is based on their perspective, which is dependent on their current view of the phenomenon, which is influenced by previous experiences with the phenomenon. The reality of a phenomenon is based on the subject's perception of it (Moustakas, 1994). While there are many interpretations, reality can be

shared because of the social context in which the experience occurred (Morrow & Smith, 2000). The shared social context for this study is the Mormon religion.

Phenomenology explores a specific experience and analyzes the meaning of that lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). From a phenomenological perspective, people create reality through *what* we experience and *how* we experience a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology focus on the subject-object relationship and how the subject's conscious interaction with the object creates how we experience what we experience (Creswell, 2007). The creation of the meaning of reality is in the subjective experience of the phenomenon, not in the objective experience (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two components to understanding a phenomenon. The first is the experience with the phenomenon, or what an individual experiences, otherwise known as structural dimension. The second, textural dimension, is the way that an individual interprets and assigns meaning to that experience, or how an individual experiences the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenology seeks to find the essence to the experience that is shared by all who have experienced the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Moustakas, 1994). The essence is the inherent qualities that relate to the experience of a phenomenon; in other words, what the experience essentially is (Moustakas, 1994; Wertz, 2005). The Mormon women interviewed in this study had different experiences and understandings of reality, each of which provides an alternate perspective of the lived experience of same-sex sexuality as a Mormon woman. The essence of the phenomenon itself can be understood by how the different perspectives fit together.

The essence is understood by viewing the phenomenon from multiple angles. Horizontalization, an analysis process, analyzes each meaning unit while giving each unit equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction takes the varied experiences of individuals and finds the common shared and unique variations of the experience. Imaginative variation is a process where every imaginable variation that could exist for a phenomenon and still be part of the essence of the experience and not that which is incidental to the experience (Wertz, 2005). The various dimensions of the phenomenon are then synthesized to understand the essence of that phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

This study seeks to describe the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality among Mormon women. While Mormon women who experience same-sex sexuality may interpret their experiences differently based on their unique characteristics and situations, the essence of the phenomenon emerges as women experience same-sex sexuality in a context of a “reality” created by the gendered and heterosexist beliefs and doctrines of the Mormon Church and promulgated by society in general. Ironically, the construction of a Mormon woman’s identity occurs in an essentialist religion that teaches that there is one Truth (or Reality) and that our identities, religious and gendered, are eternally defined. Mormon women construct their sexual identities based on their experiences and the meaning they assign those experiences. Understanding the multiple stories, perspectives, and realities of Mormon women with same-sex sexuality creates a holistic view from which to understand the phenomenon that results at the intersection of sexuality and spirituality (Moustakas, 1994) and the creation of identity from that experience.

Phenomenology and feminist inquiry both focus on the individual lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As the women shared their stories of same-sex sexuality as a Mormon, I honored the meaning that they made without judging their choices or reinterpreting their reality, which would discount how they viewed the experience (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Epoche is a phenomenological technique used to view the phenomenon without bias. Epoche means consciously setting aside personal meaning, understandings, and values (Moustakas, 1994). I used the phenomenological technique of bracketing in order to avoid bias and projecting my own experience with same-sex sexuality as a Mormon woman onto other participants. The process of bracketing included self-reflexivity and detachment in order to view the phenomenon without preconceptions or expectations (Moustakas, 1994). I will explicate how I engaged with the phenomenological research and analysis techniques as I discuss the specific methods that I used for this study.

### **Researcher as Instrument**

Qualitative research relies on the researcher as the primary instrument in gathering and analyzing the data (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Because of this, it is important to understand what I as the researcher bring to this project. I need to position myself in relation to this research because my interpretation of participant stories is mediated by my experiences (Morrow & Smith, 2000) and subject to my social/cultural/historical background (Creswell, 2007). My identities effect this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It effected the question that I chose to research and how I chose to design this study. In order for readers to make an accurate interpretation of this



study, I attempt to make my values explicit (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers use the process of reflexivity to understand our relationship to that which is studied (Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

As a feminist I must honor the viewpoint and understanding of the participants' own story (Morrow & Smith, 2000). It would be unfair and inaccurate to interpret their experiences in contradiction to their reality, such as believing that they are really oppressed within the Patriarchical structure of the LDS Church when they themselves might not feel or believe themselves to be oppressed. When I was an active, practicing Mormon, I did not feel oppressed. The messages that I heard from the leadership of the LDS Church was that all were equal and loved in the sight of God and that any difference between the sexes did not represent inequality.

This was just my experience growing up in a suburb of Mormon Utah. I felt supported and empowered as a female. I learned my feminism from the teaching of the Mormon Church. If someone had told me that I in fact was oppressed, I would have objected. Maybe I had been experiencing the human fallacy of seeing and hearing only those things within the Church that aligned with my feminist beliefs. In practice, I noticed that equality was not always maintained in wards (congregations) or within family dynamics. I know that some Mormon women have felt and experienced oppression because of the religion. I recognize the potential for difference experiences in the lived individual interpretation of beliefs. In order to understand the realities of others, I must check my perceptions in order to not bias results.

My personal experience has led me to think that it is because Mormons are told that their religious identity is the essential aspect of who they are that they experience

great conflict when their personal experiences deviate from the ideal of this identity. I experienced this identity conflict first hand as I struggled with how my seemingly essential love toward another woman could co-exist with my identity as a Mormon and belief in all of its religious tenants.

The difficult dark years I experienced strengthened my desire to know how other women faced with similar conflicts between their spiritual/religious and sexual identities were able to choose between living their religious values and following the affections of their heart. It has been my goal to conduct this research since, as an undergrad, I began hearing similar stories from other people. I obtained my Master's degree in Social Work and earned my clinical licensure. In order to gain the research skills needed for this project, I returned for a doctoral education in Social Work and focused on qualitative research.

My past brings me to this point. The confidence I have held in my various identities has shifted with new experiences and continual re-evaluation. Had I attempted to write this paper at an earlier point in my journey, my lens and understanding would have been different because I held a different relation to my beliefs and assumptions.

I engaged in the reflexive process by writing my story and experience with this phenomenon in my research journal. I present my story at the end of the methods section before transitioning to the participant's stories. As part of the reflexive process, I attempted to identify any worldviews, assumptions, and meta-goals I might hold (Morrow & Smith, 2000). I already addressed the worldview, or paradigm, guiding this researcher in a previous section. I hold the assumption that a Mormon woman with same-sex sexuality will experience conflict between her religious/spiritual and sexual

identity. The individual and social context will mitigate the conflict. During the research process, I looked for disconfirming evidence and used negative case analysis to check the validity of this assumption (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Conflict did vary depending on the degree to which a woman identified with her religious identity and the support she received from family and her peers. I assumed that most women's religious and spiritual identity intertwined and that part of the reconciliation process may involve differentiating these two identities. I hold values of empathy and acceptance toward a woman as she attempts to live the experience of same-sex sexuality in a heterosexual religion. I do not assume that all women will eventually choose to "come out" and value their sexual identity over their religious identity. Nor do I value religion over sexuality. My choices were the right choices for me and I make no assumption they would be right for anyone else. I held the meta-goal that by sharing their story the women will feel empowered by having an opportunity to voice their experience. Based on participant feedback this appeared to be the case.

Despite best intentions, bias has a tendency to creep into frameworks. I hold both insider and outsider status in relationship to the Mormon Church. Being raised in the Church, I have held and understand the insider's perspective. At the same time, having lived outside of Utah and outside of the Mormon Church and culture for numerous years, I have also gained an outsider's perspective. My personal experience with the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality enhanced the chance that women would feel comfortable participating and being open/honest because of our shared experiences. Having an assumed shared assumption of meaning also presents a disadvantage in that I might not have noticed an aspect of the phenomenon (Morrow & Smith, 2000). I

attempted to control for this by asking participants to explain what they meant by common LDS phrases like “staunch pioneer stock” rather than assuming I held the same meaning as they did.

My personal connection to this research topic makes reflexivity extremely important in order to avoid bias in the interpretation of the participant stories. To counter this, I maintained a journal throughout the research process, which contains my reflexivity, interpretations, and analysis. After each interview, I processed any emotional reactions in the journal. I discussed my reactions and interpretations with my peer research team, fellow PhD candidates who meet together to discuss our research projects, to have an unbiased third person overview the results. In addition, a dissertation committee supervised this project.

My goal in engaging in reflexivity and self-reflection was to bracket my experiences in order not to project my experience with the phenomenon onto the participants of this study (Moustakas, 1994). To assist in this process, I had a fellow PhD student conduct the same interview with me as I will use with the participants in order to better understand their experience engaging in this research project. I used bracketing in order to see the phenomenon from an unbiased, fresh perspective (Creswell, 2007). I carried minimal assumptions into the research, with the assumptions I held supporting my understanding of the structure of the phenomenon, not the essence of the experience. I address further guards against bias in interpretation in the data analysis section of this study.

## Participants

Participation criteria included: 1) women over the age of 18, 2) who are or have been a member of the LDS church, and 3) who report experiencing same-sex sexuality (as defined by the participant) at some point in their life. Women could currently hold any religious or sexual identity. I did not limit participation based on race or geographic location in which women grew up.

Given the fluidity of women's sexuality, I did not assume that women's identity would eventually reach a permanent, stable identity stage. Women who chose to participate in this study will continue to experience their sexuality and spirituality and will constantly recreate meaning based on new experiences. Their identity will continue to evolve beyond the interview snapshot representing their experience up to a given point in time. Some women experiences and the meaning that they assigned to those experiences changed between the first and second interview. For this reason, I did not group participants into a priori categories based on whether they identified as a sexual minority or maintained their religious identity. I did attempt, with various levels of success, to recruit participants who currently held various religious and sexual identities in order to represent multiple experiences and outcomes. The women's identities at the time of the study are not assumed to be static and may change with future experiences and circumstances after the completion of the study.

## Selection Procedures

Qualitative research has no a priori tests to select sample size, rather the number of participants will vary on when the study reaches informational redundancy or

theoretical saturation (Sandelowski, 1996). Informational redundancy occurs when additional participants produce no new information. Theoretical saturation occurs when theory resulting from data is fully formed and additional participants do not provide new information to inform theory (Charmaz, 2006). I began this project with the assumption that a sample size of 20 should garner enough data about the phenomenon, while at the same time still be able to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1996). Standard sample sizes for phenomenological research stand around 12 participants (Creswell, 2007). I believed that I would need to oversample in order to accurately capture the range of experiences with women who hold different identity statuses. I wanted to avoid the bias of recruiting only women who maintained or rejected their religious identity. At the same time, I allowed the size of the study to remain flexible in case I needed additional participants to understand emerging themes or if I achieved informational redundancy prior to reaching the target sample size.

Within the criteria set for participation, I used phenomenal or maximum variation in the selection of participants (Patton, 2002; Sandelowski, 1996). Phenomenal variation seeks participants who have had various experiences with the phenomenon (Sandelowski, 1996). Maximum variation selection seeks for all variations, not just the extremes which in this study would pit women who remain as active members in the Mormon Church against those who no longer practice the religion and women who identify as heterosexual against those who identify as a sexual minority. While these factions represent the extreme, there is much middle ground and women may slide between these choices throughout their lives as new sexual and spiritual experiences result in new creations of meaning. In order to avoid continued polarization of spirituality and

sexuality, this research sought participants who had a myriad of experiences. This selection procedure is most appropriate to phenomenology, which posits that a phenomenon can best understood by viewing it from multiple perspectives and viewing the object holistically. The core experiences, shared patterns and central themes in the variations of experience with sexuality and spirituality shape the essence of the experience and, in contrast to these, the uniqueness of experience (Patton, 2002). This study includes a theoretical sample of 5 women, 4 of whom participated in a pilot study and 1 transgendered woman who volunteered to participate in the current sample. Theoretical sampling increases analysis through focusing on variation and identifying gaps that need to be explored (Charmaz, 2006). This small theoretical sample highlights the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality in heterosexually identified women and the conflation of gender and sexuality.

### Recruitment

Sexual minorities are often referred to as an invisible population (Fassinger, 1991; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). There is no way to probabilistic sample Mormon women who have experienced same-sex sexuality given that there are no known parameters to this population. Women who have experienced same-sex sexuality, but choose to remain within the LDS Church may not have admitted their sexuality to anyone and are not openly recognizable.

Recruitment, therefore, was based on nonprobability purposeful and snowball sampling. I first placed my recruitment announcement (see Appendix A) on the social networking site, Facebook. First on my own profile and then asking other agencies such

as Equality Utah (a political advocacy group for LGBT Utahans) and the Utah Pride Center to post the announcement on their Facebook profiles. Equality Utah immediately reposted my recruitment announcement and almost immediately my first volunteer contacted me to inquire about participation. Despite completing the Utah Pride Center's research request form at their direction, the Pride Center never posted my announcement. I also posted my announcement on Mormon L (a private discussion board for Mormon lesbians throughout the world of which I have been a participant since 2008). From these initial postings, my announcement went viral and people started forwarding the announcement to individuals in their support network who they believed might have an interest in participating. In addition, I sent the announcements to organizations that serve individuals who identify as Mormon and same-sex attracted such as Evergreen International, NorthStar, Affirmation, and the LGBT Psychologists Guild of Utah. I am not certain which of these organizations actually shared my announcement. All participants contacted me directly. While some women told me that they had been forwarded an email by a friend, heard about the study in a counseling group, or knew me from the listserv, most did not state how they heard about the study.

I turned away one woman who had participated in Anderton's (2010) study in order to be able to compare our studies without having bias created by sharing the same sample. One woman, Tamara, who volunteered to participate presented a unique challenge since although she met all participant requirements by identifying as a Mormon lesbian, she was born a biological male. I consulted with Lisa Diamond on my dissertation committee about whether or not I should include her in my sample since being raised male in the Mormon Church would provide a different experience than being



raised female. We determined that her participation could provide valuable insight, but that I would not use the data obtained with her interview in the general analysis. Rather, I will present Tamara's story and compare that to the other participants at the end of my formal analysis. I do not include Tamara in the participant demographics below.

I stopped recruiting participants after 24 (including Tamara) as I had reached saturation. While each individual has a unique story and thus true saturation can never exist given that each new person's experience with the phenomenon will add their unique contribution, after about 20 interviews major themes emerged within and between individuals' experiences and had begun to repeat. Once I believed that I had reached saturation, I interviewed two more women to ensure that new themes would not present themselves, according to standard protocol (Sandelowski, 1996 ). I included two more women who added diverse perspectives, one due to disability and the other due to her unique story, to my sample. I do not claim to have reached saturation with all experiences.

### Participant Demographics

The sample is heavily biased toward Caucasian women who have been born or raised in families who practiced or identified with the Mormon religion and who now identify as lesbian, whether or not are sexually active or celibacy. Only one participant identified as a convert and an ethnic minority. Two women identified as bisexual and one as heterosexual. Another woman still in the process of understanding her identity identified as same-sex attracted.

Women who hold non-Caucasian race/ethnic identities, converted to the Mormon Church, or identify as heterosexual are not fully represented in the sample. Fourteen women were born or raised for a significant portion of their childhood in Utah or Southern Idaho, areas of densely Mormon populated cities. Nine women were raised outside of Utah/Idaho in areas without a large Mormon population (including California, the South, East Coast, Pacific NW, and Southwest). One woman spent half her childhood in California and the other half in Utah. Three women lived a portion of their childhood in other countries either due to parents business or missionary callings.

Women's ages ranged from 20-56, with an average age of 37. The sample is also highly educated. Four women have or are working on their PhD. Another 4 have or are working on their master's degrees. Eight have their bachelor's degrees and 3 are actively in undergraduate programs. Four have some college and/or advanced technical skills. One holds only a high school diploma.

Eleven women continue to identify as Mormon or LDS, whether or not they actively practice the religion. Twelve women now hold a different or no religious identity including: agnostic, Unitarian Universalist, atheist, nonaffiliated, nonreligious, Buddhist, 'spiritual, but not religious,' and none.

Fifteen women received their endowments (a ceremony performed in a LDS temple considered a sacred agreement with God to keep certain covenants). Seven women served a LDS mission. Seven women have female partners, only one of these partnerships is legally recognized as a domestic partnership. Six have been married to men and an additional 2 are currently married to men, all 8 of these women have children

from these heterosexual partnerships. One woman has a child from a lesbian relationship and another woman plans to have children with her female partner within the next year.

### Limitations

The women who chose to participate in this study may differ significantly from Mormon women with same-sex attractions who do not volunteer to participate. The manner of recruitment obviously biased the sample toward higher educated and most likely women who had access to a computer. The results are based on self-reported retrospective data, which may reflect bias in women unconsciously attempting to conform their current beliefs and practices to past experiences. It cannot be known if the participants are a representative sample of all Mormon women who experience same-sex sexuality.

Another limitation is that women reflected on their past experiences. Retrospective accounts may not accurately depict an event as it had occurred, but represent the reconstruction of that event from a person's memory (Polkinghorne, 2005). A memory is actively constructed each time it is remembered or discussed. The memory may be influenced and altered by later experiences or current life circumstances. Women's reflections on their past may include unconscious reconstructions in order for memories to be congruent with their current attitudes and beliefs. This is a limitation of all retrospective data. At the same time, if something is perceived as real, it is real in its consequences (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Current experience with same-sex sexuality will be interpreted based on current understanding, whether or not that is based on

“objective” recollection. Retrospective data still provides an excellent source for current interpretations of the experience.

### Core Elements of the Design

I asked each woman who volunteered to participate in an initial 1-1.5 hour digitally voice recorded interview about her experiences as Mormon women with same-sex sexuality. I informed women that after I had transcribed the first interview, I would contact them to schedule a 1/2-hour follow-up phone interview to seek clarification or discuss additional thoughts that had occurred since the first interview. I also invited participants to engage anonymously in an online discussion board created specifically for this research project where I posted preliminary data analysis in order to provide member-checking of my interpretation of the data. Women were not required to participate in the online discussion in order to participate in the interview section of this research study.

I solicited interviews until I reached informational saturation (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Analysis began with the first interview and continued throughout the duration of the study. Analysis, discussed further in a later section, followed a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994).

### Sources of Data

In-depth individual interviews are the primary source of data for this study. This is in alignment with phenomenological research methods (Moustakas, 1994). Women’s

experience with same-sex sexuality is not directly observable; therefore, data relies on participants' recollection and ability to convey that experience.

Individual interviews consisted of a primary interview and a short follow-up interview. Strategies for participant checks of the analysis provided additional data. I also used analytic and observational information from my research journal data sources. Multiple data sources are used to provide triangulation. This is important in order to obtain an accurate and consistent understanding of the phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Different sources provide depth to the case (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, I will present information I obtained in a pilot project where I interviewed 4 heterosexual identified Mormon women about their experiences with nonmarital heterosexual sexual activity and the LDS Church. In this pilot project, I asked each of the women if they had experienced any same-sex sexuality. Their responses and how it ties into this current research project will be presented at the end of the findings section.

### **Individual Interviews**

I conducted semistructured, open-ended interviews in order to allow participants flexibility in sharing their stories (Kvale, 1996). See Appendix B for interview guide. Interviews are considered co-constructed as the stories are constructed in the interaction of the interview itself (Kvale, 1996). The interviews flowed from natural conversational patterns and I not forced participants to answer a structured questionnaire. I began each interview with the question: "Tell me about your experiences with same-sex sexuality and the Mormon Church." I then allowed women to tell me their stories. For there, I

either asked them to expand on parts of their story or asked additional questions from the interview until general topics of the interview guide had been answered.

Initial interviews occurred in-person at various locations, such as at a reserved room at the University of Utah, a local public library, or a participant's home or office. Interviews occurred throughout the Salt Lake Valley. I also traveled to Southern Utah, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon in order to conduct interviews. When travel constraints made a face-to-face interview not possible (as women lived in the Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast), I conducted the interview either over the phone or via Skype (a free video chat software). Initial interviews lasted between 35 and 104 minutes, with an average of 70 minutes.

I audio-recorded all sessions for later transcription. In addition, immediately after each interview (or as soon as possible thereafter) I recorded any observations that occurred during the interview in my research journal. I personally transcribed each interview, most with the assistance of dictate software. I documented any analytic thoughts in my research journal during the transcription process.

### Follow-up Interviews

I scheduled follow-up interviews within 1 month from the initial interview. Follow-up interviews centered on any questions that arose after the first interview and during the transcription process. I also asked participants if they had any additional thoughts or insights that they would like to share since the initial interview occurred. All 24 individuals participated in a follow-up interview. Prior to the follow-up interview I re-read each transcript. All follow-up interviews occurred over the phone and were

recorded. Follow-up interviews ranged between 6 and 49 minutes, with an average of 22 minutes. I then transcribed the follow-up interviews.

### Interview Data

The combined length of each woman's interview ranged between 52 and 113 minutes, with an average of 92 minutes. The final interview data included 37.5 hours of interview and 512 pages of transcription.

### Participant Check

Once I transcribed all of the interviews, I created a composite description of each woman's experience. I provided each participant with their story and asked for feedback. I gave them the opportunity to correct, revise, or clarify any part of their story. Ten women responded. Feedback requested only minor revisions either for accuracy to create greater anonymity.

### Online Discussion Board

I invited participants to engage with my analysis in an online discussion board. Participation in the online discussion was not a requirement to participate in the larger study. I made the discussion board only available to participants. I created the discussion board with Google groups and then created a unique sign-in for each woman so they could only see each other's pseudonyms, not actual names.

I then set up the online discussion board in Google Groups in order to have member feedback during the analysis process. I set up an anonymous Google account for

each participant to use as her username in order to access the online discussion. In the initial welcome message on the forum, I again reminded participants that participation was voluntarily and they may withdraw at anytime. I informed them that the discussions that occur on this online forum would be used as data for my dissertation, unless someone requests that information they posted not be used. I reminded them of confidentiality limitations in a group atmosphere and reminded them of the unique vulnerabilities of an online environment. I ensured that privacy was maintained by the creation of a discussion board through Google Groups specific to this research and that the discussion board will be deleted once the study has been completed. In order to view and participate in the group, participants had to have been invited by me to join the group. I set up usernames for each participant so that personal emails would not be used or shown to other participants. The group consisted of Web-only participation and discussion group posts would not be sent to their personal email. The group was not be listed in a directory and cannot be seen on Internet search engines. I then gave them access to a copy of the consent form and also provided them with access to my proposal via Google Documents.

I began by posting initial themes that emerged during the transcription process, which included: family, sexuality, religion vs. spirituality, religious beliefs/leaving the Church, community, mental health, and sexual abuse. I informed participants that would continue to post as my analysis developed.

Unfortunately, the online discussion group was a dismal failure. Few women accessed the online group and only three posts were made by participants. Reasons for this may be varied. For one, women expressed primary interest in sharing their stories



individually with me and did not appear engaged with the on-going analysis. Because of the measures I took to maintain privacy, women had to extend additional effort to log on to know if anyone else had posted. In general, the women in this study had busy lives and other commitments that took priority. Women also had other supports, including involved in already established online groups dedicated to sexuality, and did not need the online group to process their experiences. Only one woman showed real interest in engaging others on this site, but when the other participants did not engage she did not pursue further involvement.

### **Observational/Analytic Journal**

Finally, I kept a research journal throughout the process of this study that held my self-reflective, observational, and analytic thoughts. I have used the observational and analytic data recorded in the journal during my analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Data Management**

As the primary investigator, I conducted, transcribed, and analyzed all interviews for this study. I used HyperResearch, a qualitative analysis software, to manage the data. This program allowed me to store, code, and easily retrieve data during the analysis process (Creswell, 2007).

### Analysis of the Data

Data analysis followed phenomenological methods as outlined by Moustakas (1994). The end result of phenomenological analysis is a comprehensive description of a phenomenon, which I present in the findings section (Moustakas, 1994). Analysis is an inductive process beginning with concrete data and moving to more abstract themes (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative analysis seeks patterns, themes, and relationships in the stories of participants (Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Before beginning analysis, I engaged in bracketing my experience through self-reflection with the phenomenon in order to approach the topic with a fresh, unbiased perspective (Moustakas, 1994). I have continued this self-reflective process throughout the analysis. Analysis began with immersion in the data, first through transcribing each interview and then reading and re-reading the transcripts. I coded transcripts for significant statements, verbatim quotes that denote important aspects of the phenomenon, (Creswell, 2007) and meaning units, sectioning when a participant shifts meaning in the interview (Wertz, 2005). The next step I took is horizontalization where all significant statements and meaning units from every transcript are listed, each given equal validity and importance. I then reduced similar meaning units and statements into nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping categories (Moustakas, 1994; Yeh & Inman, 2007). I developed themes from these categories. Major themes included sexuality, religion, spirituality, family, community, mental health, and reconciling. These themes guided the structural and textural descriptions of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The comprehensive description that a phenomenological study seeks is based on two aspects of experience, structural and textural. The structural description is what an

individual experiences with a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The structural description for this study describes what a Mormon woman experiences when she experiences same-sex sexuality (i.e., what did she experience in terms of thoughts, feelings, and/or behaviors and what was her behavioral response to these thoughts, feelings and/or behaviors). The textural description is how an individual experiences the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description will include how the participant felt about the experience, how they interpreted the experience, and what meaning they assigned to the experience. How participants experience same-sex sexuality depends on context and such factors as personal beliefs, relationship to Mormon Church, family's relationship to Mormon Church and doctrine, and their community's response to their experience (Creswell, 2007). Past experiences, perceptions, judgments, and current perspective inform interpretation and meaning-making (Moustakas, 1994). I constructed a composite structural-textural description of the phenomenon for each individual based on synthesis of the structural-textural descriptions. The themes that emerged from these descriptions represent the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Interpretation of the data occurred by finding and analyzing themes (Charmaz, 2006). Themes sought may include experiences and variables that affect a woman's decision to either maintain or change her religious identity and the resolution or maintained tension between religious and sexual identities. I sought variations in themes based on similarities and differences between women and the identities that they assume; however, a limitation is that the analysis only represents one moment in time based on retrospective data. On-going, longitudinal studies are needed to determine if there is a

significant and consistent difference among women who hold a given identity and whether this identity remains stable.

Context is extremely important in understanding how same-sex sexuality is experienced (Creswell, 2007). The context of the doctrine, community, and culture of the Mormon Church influence how Mormon women experience same-sex sexuality.

Through the use of prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2007), I have attempted to connect and interact with Mormon women who experience same-sex sexuality in order to accurately understand and interpret stories that women shared with me for this research project. Since the inception of this project and the beginning of my doctoral education in 2008, I have sought out and engaged myself with others who have experienced same-sex sexuality by joining a Mormon Lesbian chat site, involving myself in activities at the Utah Pride Center, reading published books and blogs by Mormons who have experienced same-sex attraction, attending the annual Affirmation (an organization devoted to same-sex attracted Mormons) conference, and sharing my personal experiences with the larger community.

I used negative/deviant case analysis, another qualitative strategy, to counter researcher bias (Creswell, 2007; Morrow & Smith, 2000). Negative case analysis meant actively searching for disconfirming evidence in regards to my assumptions and preliminary analysis. When a dominate variation in a theme emerged, I looked at participants' whose stories did not follow similar story lines and how their experience fits within the general developing themes. I used constant comparative method in conjunction with negative case analysis. This qualitative method ensured rigor by

constantly comparing categories to subcategories, to themes, and to disconfirming evidence (Fassinger, 2005).

I used analytic memos, recorded in my research journal, to assist in the data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Memos record evolving thoughts and theories on codes and themes. I used memos as part of the constant comparative method in order make explicit comparisons between data, codes, and categories (Charmaz, 2006).

I used member checking to confirm the accuracy of the analysis (Creswell, 2007). In an ideal interview, the interview is interpreted during the interview with the participant and when interpretations started to arise I check them during the interview process (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Once I transcribed the interview, I constructed the composite narrative and provided this to each participant for review and an opportunity for clarification and feedback. In addition to member checking, I used peer-debriefing to confirm my research bias was not influencing the results (Creswell, 2007). This occurred throughout the year with my peer research team composed of fellow PhD students. My dissertation committee will also review the analysis.

As mentioned previously, the end written result of phenomenological study is a comprehensive description of the phenomenon. I use thick description to illustrate that analysis is grounded in the data (Creswell, 2007). Thick description provides the context in which the participants' make meanings (Morrow, 2007). Thick description includes placing a description of the event in the thoughts, emotions, cultural meanings and interpretations, intentions, motivations and circumstances that surround an event (Ponterotto, 2006). Thick description provides sufficient meaning for the reader to be able to make the same interpretation and have an in-depth understanding about the nature

of the phenomenon (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). Throughout the finding I use quotes whenever possible to capture the intent of the speaker. In addition, when writing the composite descriptions of individuals I attempted to mirror their voice as much as possible.

When writing up the findings, I used terms such as some, few, and many because using percentages would give the undue perception that this sample is generalizable to the population. Rather than seeking concreteness, I showed the nebulous nature of the phenomenon.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the authenticity and accuracy of the analysis that is grounded in the data (Yeh & Inman, 2007). The concept of trustworthiness is analogous to validity in quantitative research methods (Creswell, 2007). In order to ensure the trustworthiness of this study's results, I have included numerous strategies to counter-act bias I may hold. These included prolonged engagement, member-checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis. In addition, I used thick description in order for readers to thoroughly understand analysis and through rich context-laden details can come to the same interpretations as those presented in this paper (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007).

I continued to immerse myself in the Lesbian Mormon culture, the research literature, and the data in order to accurately represent participants' experiences and to understand the context in which the experience occurs. The past year I have attended Circling the Wagons conference, a conference held for LGBT Mormons, watched

numerous video clips of LGB Mormons sharing their stories for a documentary being made about this subject (<http://farbetweenmovie.com>), continued to engage in online forums, and read publications by Mormons with same-sex attractions who desire to remain faithful to their religious beliefs (Mansfield, 2011; Matis et al., 2004). I engaged in self-reflexive journaling in order to make my assumptions and internal beliefs explicit so that they did not implicitly affect my interpretations. Although not included in this report, the research journal may be used as an audit trail. An audit trail allows other researchers to see analytic steps and evolution of thought in analysis process (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

### **Ethical Considerations**

As a social worker, I am bound by the NASW code of ethics (<http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code>), which reaffirms feminist values of respect and dignity of persons. Our ethical code also promotes social justice and prohibits exploitation of others. Researcher/participant power differentials have been considered throughout the study and I consciously strove towards empowering participants and equalizing the power relationship (although an equal relationship is never fully possibly).

This research topic had the potential bring up negative emotions or unresolved issues. The negative implications of conflicting spiritual and sexual identities include suicidal ideation and attempts (Hunter, 2010). Being aware of this negative impact and the possibility that participating in this research could trigger these types of thoughts, I created a list of resources available to the individual in their area. As a clinical social worker, I am trained in crisis intervention and monitored for signs of distress. One

participant actually rescheduled her initial interview due to a suicide attempt, for reasons other than agreeing to participate in this study, she made that day. She informed me of the attempt after that fact. By the time that we conducted the first interview, she had stabilized and been reconnected with her social supports. Although I did not provide therapy, I did assess her safety plan and ensured that she did not remain at continued risk of harm. After our interview, she told me that she felt more connected and less alone.

I did not need to stop any interview due to any participant experiencing extreme or unmanageable emotions. I reminded participants throughout the interview process that they could withdraw from the study at anytime and did not need to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. I reminded participants about the limits to confidentiality.

I obtained IRB approval from the University of Utah. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, I held confidentiality in highest regards. I asked participants to provide written informed consent, which I kept in a locked file to which only I will have access. Prior to providing consent, I reminded participants that their participation voluntarily and may stop participation or withdraw from the study at any time. All participants had the option of choosing their own pseudonym and I assigned a pseudonym for those who did not have a preference. Any identifying information has been altered. I shared preliminary drafts of the report with participants and gave them the option to edit any information about themselves in the final report.

I used a digital voice recorder to record the interviews and transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word on my personal computer. My personal computer is password protected and I am the only individual with access. In addition, all transcripts



reflect the participants' pseudonym to protect their identity. No identifying information is connected to the transcripts. At the completion of the research project, the audio recordings will be erased.

During the course of the interviews, a few women discussed the sexual abuse they had experienced throughout their lives. In order to further protect the identity of the women who disclosed abuse, I do not identify the participant when sharing quotes about this topic.

### **Reflexivity**

My identity as a Mormon once took precedence in my life. Being raised in the Mormon religion and in the White middle-class suburban Utah culture dominated by the religion, I found the religious doctrine easy to believe. I had no reason not to believe. I wanted to be a good person and do the right thing. I trusted those around me and so believed what they told me they believed and what they believed I should believe. I wanted to believe. I wanted to "know." I listened during testimony meeting and church conferences where members would state that they knew without a shadow of doubt that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the one true Church, that Jesus is the Christ and Savior of all (wo)mankind, that Joseph Smith (the founder of the Mormon Church) was a prophet, and that God is connected to this world through living Prophets. While not part of the testimony which I dutifully shared when I could overcome my social anxiety enough to stand up in a meeting, I realize now that I also implicitly believed that if I did not believe in this specific religion and follow the rules, then that

meant I was a wicked person, did not deserve heavenly glory, and that my family would not be together forever (which I was taught was the only true happiness).

In my teenage years, the thought of dating men caused tears. I could not say why heterosexual romantic behaviors terrified me, but I felt disconnected from the heterosexual world of my peers. I ignored my feelings, believing that God would work it out in time. I had other goals that I wanted to meet, such as going to college and serving a mission for the LDS Church.

My life altered when I fell in love with a woman. A new friend entered my life and our relationship got closer and closer. I loved her and I wanted to express this love physically. I struggled with the love I felt because it challenged my ability to live faithfully in the Mormon religion given the strong emotional sexual attractions that I felt.

My father, diagnosed with cancer when I was 16, died within a year of meeting this woman. She comforted me in my grief and loss. She replaced the one person who had I known would always love me. My love for her felt so pure and yet I was being told that it was sinful. I loved her with all my heart. I had never loved anyone before. I had never even been on a date prior to meeting her. I had no idea what any of these feelings meant. I only knew that I wanted to be with her forever. I wanted the promise of an eternal family with her. Yet, I feared that creating a life with her may mean giving up my relationship with my father. The promise of seeing him again provided great comfort in my loss.

Believing that I needed to serve God and humankind by going on a mission for the LDS church, I ended the sexual relationship that had developed and strove to repent in order to be worthy to serve. My mission deepened the conflict that I felt because even

though I attempted to obey every mission rule and be as perfect as I could for God, I continued to feel a deep love for a woman that I was not supposed to feel. Being reminded that “no success could ever compensate failure in the home” (home meaning a heterosexual family), I became deeply depressed and suicidal. I strove to work more diligently on my mission, only to be forced to return home from my mission after only 7 months due to physical illness.

Not being able to choose between love and God again, I attempted to run away from my internal conflict. I feared disappointing my religious community, a community that had preconceptions about my identity. I moved out of Utah with the woman I loved. She quickly broke my heart, no longer wanting to deal with the strain of my spiritual struggle on our relationship.

I delved into years of depression and internal anguish as I felt pressure to choose one core aspect of myself over another. I could be lesbian or I could be Mormon, but I could not be both. I did not know how to stop being either. I attempted to attend Church, but felt like I no longer belonged to the community. Eventually, I stopped attending church, praying, and reading the scriptures. I continued to fall in love with women, but managed to sabotage my relationships due to an underlying belief that I would someday have to return to living my religious beliefs. I experimented with heterosexuality and while finding that I could enjoy a sexual relationship with a man, I never felt an emotional attraction that would be needed to develop a healthy romantic relationship. I did not feel guilty about my few encounters with men as that behavior meant nothing compared to the sin of my sexual orientation.

Years later, I returned to Utah. I moved back into my childhood into the ward in which my parent's raised me. I realized, being submersed back into the Utah Mormon culture, that I no longer identified with this religion that I once had considered part of my eternal nature. I chose to remove my name from the membership records of the Mormon Church because I honored the faith of my childhood and did not want to represent membership when I did not live according to those beliefs. I have, over the course of a difficult journey, become comfortable and confident with my identity as a queer woman.

My family always supported me. They allowed me to live my life and coped by not talking about it. In 2009, I informed my mother that I intended to get married to the woman I was then dating. She called the marriage "sacrilege." She then demanded that my partner move into our family home so that my mother could continue to support me while I finished school. I pointed out that this demand seemed contrary to her initial reaction. She pleaded with me, saying that she never says anything. We agreed to live with my family. A year later, I had another failed relationship under my belt, this time due to poor communication and incompatible personality styles. This relationship, unfortunately, proved harder to get out of because we had legally married each other in Massachusetts and now no state was willing to give us a divorce.

Soon after my separation with my wife, I began my relationship with my current partner. For the first time since beginning the journey of sexual identity development, I felt able to form a healthy relationship. She has been my greatest support over the past two and a half years. She chose to come live with my family and me in Utah since I still hard work to do in order to complete this project.

We live in the house with my mother, my brother who returned from his LDS mission right as my marriage broke apart, my sister, her husband, and their four children. My sister and her family actively participate in the Mormon religion. They have never once disparaged our relationship. Her young children adore my partner. My partner and I support them in their religious practices. My mother treats my partner the exact same as my brother-in-law. When pressed, my mother still believes that our relationship is “just sinful.” Yet, she finds a way to support us anyway.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### **Structural/Textural Description**

Structural Description: What Mormon women experience with same-sex sexuality. Women experience a sense of being different from others. This experience might be triggered by not having the same experiences or interests as their female peer group or by experiencing attraction to another woman. Upon recognizing the difference or attraction, women then interpret and assign meaning. Women may immediately recognize and label the feelings as same-sex sexuality, may dismiss the attractions and pursue heterosexuality, or grapple with understanding their sexual orientation in particular in addition to sexuality in general. A woman's feelings will lead her to decide either to pursue a relationship with a woman or to avoid the feelings (including actively trying to change attractions).

Women may experiment with identities and experiences with other same-sex attracted women. Accepting a nonheterosexual identity is a process that can be lengthened due to conflicting religious beliefs. Sexual orientation does not tend to diminish through therapeutic or faith means. Once a woman acknowledges and accepts a sexual minority identity she then chooses whether to engage in sexual relationships with other women or remain celibate. Women who experience heterosexual attractions may

form romantic relationships with men. Women who are primarily oriented toward other women may not be able to maintain satisfying relationships with male partners. Some women feel most authentic by being active in the Mormon religion and remaining celibate, some by holding both identities and being inactive or less active in the practice of the religion, some by relinquishing the Mormon identity and engaging in same-sex relationships. Women may try different strategies at different points based on what feels right for them at the time. Choosing to identify as a sexual minority may result in conflict with family and loss of community. Subsequent losses must then be grieved. Understanding sexual identity means that a woman has to make choices regarding her sexual relationship and this may trigger questioning of religious identity if that has not already occurred for different reasons. Women appear to seek acceptance and honesty, sometimes after a period of self-hatred and self-destruction. Religious and sexual identities continue to evolve interdependently. The process involves recognition of same-sex sexuality, response to same-sex feelings, personal meaning making, and possible change of paradigm in how a woman understands the world.

Textural Description: How Mormon women experience same-sex sexuality. How a woman interprets her feelings and experiences depend on her environmental interactions with social supports. Her interpretation is heavily influenced by the context and the messages that she receives about sexuality. Since the Mormon community teaches that homosexual feelings are “unnatural,” most women in this study believed they were somehow defective until they eventually accepted their sexual orientation.

### **Individual Composite Descriptions**

This section presents composite descriptions of each individual woman's experience with same-sex sexuality and the LDS Church. I include this because women repeatedly stated the desire to know other women's stories. The women in this study shared their stories with me in order to help others who share a similar struggle or experience. I present their stories individually and then in the following section will discuss common themes in their experiences. As much as possible I used their own words and tried to mirror their language when sharing their story. While I provided women with the opportunity to verify and correct their story, it should be remembered that I am retelling their stories and thus the stories have been reconstructed according to my perspective. Of note, I did remove spacer fillers in direct quotes, such as "um" and "you know."

#### **Samantha**

Samantha is a 39-year-old divorced white female who identifies as active LDS. Samantha considers herself to be "probably bisexual," although she does not publically identify as a sexual minority. She grew up on the east coast in an area she considers to be the mission field because few other Mormons lived in the area. Her family never missed church, always read scriptures, prayed, and held family home evening. Her father served as branch president (an ecclesiastical leadership position) of their congregation

Samantha remembers herself as a tomboy who did not like playing with dolls. "Everybody knew I was a tomboy and that was okay." Samantha experienced other difficulties in her childhood due to activities with neighborhood children that made her



feel as though she disappointed God. In her youth, Samantha's family moved to an area of the Northwest with a relatively large Mormon population. Samantha, for the first time, made friends who shared her religion. She did not feel as lonely as she had and she believed that now she could be a good person. At age 13, Samantha started dating a boy on whom she had a crush. "He would only hold hands, he would never go any further than that and I just felt so safe." They broke up on and off throughout high school and then he left to serve a mission for the LDS Church, while Samantha went to college.

I didn't really think about [or] notice anything homosexual about me until college and I had a best girlfriend who we would do lots of things together and we were watching TV one night and I was just kind of playing with her hair no big deal, but you know I remember feeling super strongly again I wish I was a guy. I would totally marry this girl she's awesome. I love her, you know. But it didn't feel, I don't know they didn't feel sexual at that time. It caught me off guard a little bit to have this, these feelings like oh my gosh. We graduated and we kind of went our separate ways and I didn't think about it too much again.

Her boyfriend returned from his mission and at age 20 they got married. They had a son together. After 4 ½ years of marriage, Samantha came home one day:

And I saw some pictures of naked men that I found on the computer and I'm like well there are only he and I in the house and I didn't download them so it was him. And he just sobbed, "yes I'm gay." He had started cheating on me right after we got married. And this just killed me because he had guys coming over to the house while I was working. We got married in the Temple, picture of us and the Temple right on the wall, and he's having an affair right in our house.

They divorced and her husband basically disappeared from their son's life.

Samantha has raised her son as a single mother. Her son knows that his father is gay and is in a relationship with another man. This experience embittered her for a time.

And right after I was getting divorced I just looked at every guy and thought he's gay. He's gay. Any a good looking man, he's gay. He's gay. I was so pissed off at gay men you know. I didn't mind gay women because I felt like they had reasons to be gay.

After she divorced, she met a woman, Jerry, at work and the close friendship they formed then has lasted these past 10 years. “We just did everything together and I adore her and she adores me. And we travel. We go to Europe. We've been everywhere together.”

Earlier in their friendship, Jerry had a crush on another male coworker, Tom. Samantha helped set them up. They started dating. Samantha's reaction surprised and confused her.

And I freaked out. This is when I realized okay there is something going on with me because I realized that I was really jealous. And I was jealous of Tom because he was with Jerry. And I was freaking out. Like I don't know it was just weird. I ended up telling her that I thought I had these, some feelings. She was uncomfortable, but she wanted us to still be friends and I wanted to not mess up our friendship by you know being weird.

Samantha had shared that she might be in love with her. They have had one other conversation a couple of years later about Samantha's feelings. Although Jerry expresses disgust at thoughts of same-sex sexuality, they have remained close friends.

Being single has been difficult. Samantha reports having a strong sex drive that is at least partially driven by a high testosterone level. Despite this, she chooses to practice celibacy because she is not married according to her religious beliefs. One date led to some sexual play and guilt drove her to confess to her bishop. Her bishop responded in a kind and loving way, acknowledging how hard it was to be celibate after one has been married. This slap on the wrist allowed Samantha to be open to experimenting with a female co-worker who identified as lesbian and who had recognized that Samantha was in love with Jerry.

I just decided I was going to kind of experiment and see. I didn't like, I didn't love her, I didn't, but I was just kind of I guess curious. So we ended up having a short little relationship and I just, there's no way in hell that I would want

anybody ever to know that. At first she would give me massages and whatever else. And it was again like the, I felt like the fight or flight or freeze a little bit like I knew she was coming on to me, but there was part of me that was curious. But when I actually let it happen and we really, really did some stuff I felt so sick. Like I mean like I just put my face in my pillow and sobbed. It felt all about spirituality and what I believed and about how God felt about me and how I'm so weak and so stupid and it was horrible. It felt horrible and so at that time I thought I never ever want to put Jerry in that position so even though I have thoughts and stuff I know I'll, first of all I never, I don't want to lose my temple recommend. I never ever want her to feel like I felt that time when that happened. Ever. It was horrible.

After this experience they continued seeing each other as friends and engaged in some sexual activities a few time. They never engaged in behavior that Samantha would consider sexual intercourse. This woman moved out of state after about a month and Samantha has never been sexual with any other woman. Samantha did not confess this incidence to her bishop, in part because he had forgiven her so readily for the first indiscretion with the man, and in part due to fear that she would be released from her favorite church calling working with her ward's female youth. She admits that she is still in love with Jerry.

But I interpret my feelings, we have a total emotional connection and I know, I know I'm in love with her and I know if she, oh I don't know what I do because I still believe the Church is true. So that would be horrible if she decided oh guess what I'm in love with you too. I don't know what I would do because I think it would really be, it would be horrible. Because right now I can be like yes I'm in love with her, but I value our friendship. I don't want to ruin our friendship, so I'm not going to do anything stupid. And I also value my membership in the Church and I'm not going to do anything stupid. So I feel like I have some safety nets in place I guess.

She accepts her feelings of attraction toward other women. She has considered that she would "probably choose to be a lesbian" if her religion permitted it. "I feel like I'm making a sacrifice and I don't get, I'm not mad at God or anything about that because I think you know that's what we have to do in life sometimes is sacrifice."

Samantha tried marrying a second time. Because of her weight, she does not feel as though she has many chances to have a relationship and when a man came into her life, she wanted the relationship. She did not love him, but married him because she did not want the feelings that she had toward Jerry. She thought that being in a stable relationship with someone would prevent her from becoming depressed if Jerry began dating again. Her second marriage lasted only a couple of years. At this time, she does not want to consider having another relationship with a man until her son has grown.

As far as relationships, I want to meet a guy who I can fall in love with... Women just connect better. I feel more connected to women. So I don't know if I'll ever meet a guy that I can connect with like that and him not be gay.

She has thought:

Jerry's 37 and she's not married, never been married and she really, really wants to get married. And I think if she never gets married and I never get married we can just, not that we'd have a sexual relationship ever, but we could have a fulfilling emotional connection you know. I want to go live on, my parents have a farm and I can go live on the farm and I don't know what is going to happen, but I'm sure the Church will be a part of it. I just, I can't imagine it not being.

Samantha has always believed that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true. She has never questioned. She continues to be very active in church.

I mean, I don't do everything that I'm supposed to. I don't read my Scriptures. I don't pray like I'm supposed to do. I do go to church every Sunday. I go to the Temple. And I try to be a good person and do what I'm supposed to do. But I've always had a lot of guilt about things and I always have felt like I can do better. Another thing that I felt very, that's very cool, is that I'm not one of those people who gives up.

### Andie

Andie is a 46-year-old single Caucasian female who identifies as lesbian and actively participates in the Mormon religion. Andie grew up in the Salt Lake Valley in

Utah. “I was born into a family that is very staunch LDS, both parents and both sides of the family.” Her ancestry includes general authorities of the Church. Her family actively participated in the Mormon religion in her youth, including having family home evening weekly. She describes the Church being at the center of all activities. Because of Andie’s belief in the Church, she experienced conflict because of her same-sexuality early on in her life.

I knew from a young age from memories that I have from approximately 6 that I was different and that I tended to have crushes on females. And so basically around 8 when I kind of figured out what it was and that it’s so wrong and so different from the way I was being raised, that I promised myself at that point that, naively obviously, that nobody would ever know. I would never tell a soul what I felt inside. And that I would just grow up and get married and have kids and do what I was supposed to do.

Keeping this secret to herself caused Andie to feel like a fraud.

But the big problem for me is that I knew at a young age and keeping it quiet. My feelings were in direct conflict with what I was learning about the Church and growing up. And really I started to have a real problem with guilt and you know here you start to have hormones that kind of kick up and I can’t do anything about them. I have to stuff them down. I have to pretend that they are not there. Ignore them. And in fact pretend that I have them for guys.

This bind in which Andie found herself produced anxiety and depression because she felt like two different people and therefore a liar. While she could not deny her sexuality to herself, she could also not deny her belief in the Mormon religion.

Really from a young age I’ve had a very strong testimony of the Church. Not just from my parents. Not just from friends or teachers or whatever. I developed my own testimony of what I was being taught and what I was learning and what I was studying. And have always had a testimony...Because everything that I read, I believed. I knew. I knew it was true. I had a testimony that just wouldn’t quit. And wouldn’t die...Testimony that this is the true gospel on the earth. This is Christ’s gospel. He is at the head of it. But there is a Father in Heaven and Christ. And I believe in the atonement and the plan of salvation from where we came from, to why we are here, to where we are going. What it takes to get there. I believe that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. I have a testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

She continued silently in her struggle throughout high school. In order to hide her own identity, she responded by making fun of gays and lesbians to fit in with her peers. She received an athletic scholarship to attend a college and moved out of her family home. She continued to feel pressure as her cohort began to pair off and marry. Andie experienced severe depression, but could not share this with anyone or they might figure out that her depression stemmed from this conflict with her same-sex sexuality. At the age of 21, she attempted suicide by firearm. Fortunately, a friend intervened and pushed the gun down so that the wound did not end up being fatal.

And that kind of opened up the valve. I knew that I had to do something and I knew that for me I would have to live the lifestyle. I couldn't just be LDS and not live the lifestyle. I had these feelings that were so strong that I wanted to live the lifestyle. I wanted to date women. I wanted to develop a relationship.

Andie went into counseling. While she opened up herself and began looking for other women like herself, she still did not tell her parents.

I ended up getting to know this woman and we started dating. And that lead to my first relationship and I knew that's...that felt so comfortable. It felt like I was home finally. In a sense it was like this pressure valve had been released, but in another sense it was like 'oh no, what have I done.' You know I've committed one of the most grievous sins. I mean you are taught that sex out of marriage is one of the most grievous sins right up there with adultery and murder...so I still had the guilt.

Only one or two friends knew about this relationship. After this relationship ended, she dated a couple of other women during her final years of college. Upon graduating, she moved back to her parents' house and met a woman who became her "first real serious relationship." This woman received an opportunity to move to another state for her job and asked Andie, now 23, to join her. For Andie this meant, "If I wanted this relationship I either had to be all in or all out." She chose to be all the way in.

As Andie prepared for this large move in her life, her mom came to her one day and said, “I know that you are gay and until you tell me that with your own mouth, I want you out of my house.” Andie came out to her mother in that moment. Even though Andie’s mother suspected her sexual orientation, having it confirmed hurt. Andie moved out of her parents’ home. She did not talk to her mom for a couple of months in order to let her mom have the opportunity to process this information. When Andie did contact her mother again, they were able to repair their relationship.

It was just interacting and becoming more supportive overtime. She never was angry with me...I mean she was always just loving and you know she just said to me, she said, “I’ll love you no matter what. I just want you to be happy with your life. And if you can stay close to, stay close to Heavenly Father and just be the best person you can possibly be.”

Andie moved to the South with her partner. Her partner also came from a Mormon background. They tried attending church together for 1 year, but did not continue because:

It was just too hard because I know for me there was still so much guilt every time I would go because I still believed what I was being taught. But yet I was not living the fullness of it. And they just didn’t mix together. It was like oil and water. They both felt so right. And how could this possibly be? And you know this whole time the guilt continues...this horrendous guilt. Because they both feel right and what do I do? You know what do you do with your life.

After 6 years, they ended the relationship because they were at different stages in life due to their age differences. Andie dated another woman “seriously” for about 2 years. She then entered into an 8-year relationship. Andie and her partner often travelled back to Utah together. Andie would fill up her suitcase with religious books. She continued to experience periods of depression and guilt.

Andie’s family has been supportive of her and her relationships, but Andie felt like an outsider in the family because of her inability to fully participate in certain family

ceremonies, like when her siblings married in the temple. When her partner broke up with her, Andie felt compelled to participate in temple ceremonies, which would mean returning to full activity in the Church and remaining celibate. She reports that she always knew that her relationships with women would not last because she always had the desire to return to Church. She decided to move back to Utah.

And I thought that by coming home it would be easy. I would be home, back in it. It would be easy. Well it was the dumbest thing I've ever thought, I think. I got home and it was the same thing. They were both a part of who I was. They were both entrenched in my identity.

Andie dated women for the first 5 years back in Utah. She also received counseling by her ecclesiastical leaders. Andie sabotaged her relationships and finally stopped dating because she did not want to hurt these women about whom she really cared. She turned her full energy to the Church.

I went through a year being this is what I'm doing going to church. I was kind of given a pseudo job in the ward. And you know I grew up in, this ward that I am in here I grew up in. So there were a lot of people that I knew and the nice thing about it is they may have known and a lot, some of them did know, nobody cared. Nobody judged me because of that. And I was accepted. I was never treated funny or differently. Where it got really weird is with friends that I had here that were gay that did have Mormon ties. When they found out that I went back to church...I lost friendships. "How could you possibly do that when it goes against you being gay?"

Andie talked to many leaders in the Church about her experience and why the Church takes that stance that it does. She thinks that the Church does not offer the right type of services that members with same-sex sexuality need and sends the wrong messages about the cause of same-sex sexuality. She reconciles these issues with accepting that while the gospel is true, men are fallible. Andie still identifies as lesbian and has no desire to enter into a relationship with a man during this life. She actively



participates in church and maintains a commitment to celibacy in order to reach her eternal goals.

I learned for myself and I respect any person's decision what they decide and what path they decide to follow. I respect it. Anybody involved with the Church and that identifies as a lesbian, God love them. They are awesome because it isn't easy. And for me the right decision has been to and I finally did become temple worthy about a year ago and have been through the temple and basically what it means, and believe me I am not dead by any stretch of the imagination. My feelings are still there and I fight with them.

### Daisy Jane

Daisy Jane is a 42-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as LDS. When asked about her sexual identify she stated:

I'm working on that. I'm very much in the process of working on that. How I self identify? Right now I'm most comfortable with I struggle with same-sex attraction. Am I a lesbian? Yes. Am I homosexual? Yes. Am I heterosexual? No. Is that a clear enough answer?

Daisy Jane grew up in the Church in a small town in Utah county.

My parents were not active when I was young, but all my friends were and I went to church. I went to primary. I love, I love religion. I always have. I love the philosophies of religion. I've always wanted to please God. And I've always had that desire. So as a kid I always went to church even though my parents didn't. And walked there and walked home. And, and I wanted to be perfect and sometimes I wonder how much of that plays into trying to fix my own self. You know, if I can be perfect. If I aspire to be perfect, I would eventually recover from these feelings that I knew were different.

Daisy Jane recognized her attractions towards other girls in 4<sup>th</sup> grade when realizing that the other girls had attractions to boys.

And this is different for me...in the LDS faith and families are forever and man plus woman equals temple marriage and living together forever as families. And so for me I'm thinking, I understand that, it makes sense to me when you tell me, or explain it to me, but I'm feeling something completely different.

This led Daisy Jane into what she calls her “shaming phase.” While she knew what she was feeling and experiencing, she believed that if anyone knew they would find her disgusting. She did not tell anyone about her attractions and felt like she even had to hide this part of herself from God and not reveal the secret desires of her heart in prayer.

She tried to like boys and even dated males throughout high school, but it didn’t make sense to her. The boys would tell her that she was different from other girls because she did not want to make out with them. Daisy Jane did have one high boyfriend, Robert. They broke up because she wanted him to go on a mission and he did not want to go. Daisy Jane entered BYU, a Church sponsored college. She dated a lot of men in college, but did not feel anything for them.

For me dating a guy is like going out with a piece of cardboard. There’s no emotional response. There’s no physical response. So I just found a guy that was a return missionary, he was making a good living, he was going to school, and I got engaged to him. And my mom had a meltdown because she felt like he wasn’t the guy for me, that I wasn’t in love and just wasn’t what she had in mind for me.

The reaction of her mother confused Daisy Jane because she thought she was doing everything that she was supposed to do. Daisy Jane developed depression and eventually broke off the engagement because of the lack of support from her mother. After this experience she decided to serve a mission.

I put in my papers to serve a mission and I was really excited about it because I didn’t want to feel affection for anyone. I didn’t want to feel any affection. I didn’t want to pretend to feel it for boys. I was afraid to feel what I was feeling. And so I just wanted to go on a mission where I wouldn’t have that...I have such a love for the gospel and for my savior...it just sounded like a good, comfortable place for me to be and to be away.

Daisy Jane believes that, “If there’s one place that you are going to find out whether you’re gay or not, it’s definitely on a mission.” Living closely and sharing a life

with a female companion confirmed to Daisy Jane that this was the type of relationship that she wanted. Although she felt some attractions to a few of her companions, she did not act on them. She did, however, return from her mission seeking a relationship with another woman. Not really knowing how to pursue a relationship with women, she just started trying to develop emotionally intimate relationships and hoped that a woman would respond to her.

Back at BYU, Daisy Jane reconnected with another woman who had served on the same mission, although they were never companions.

She started inviting me to come stay with her a lot. Her parents were gone for the summer and so I would go and stay in her house and that was it. That was what I wanted. To sleep in her bed and live, that just filled my bucket completely to be with her and get up and go to school and work and come home to her was, that was the life.

One night Daisy Jane told her friend about her feeling of wanting to be close to her and kiss her. Her friend “freaked out.” Daisy Jane learned through this experience not to put herself out there unless she felt certain the other person returned her feelings.

Not discouraged from pursuing a same-sex relationship, she dove into school. She met a classmate, Angie, and they started to spend time together. It did not take long from them to click and for a romantic relationship to develop. For Daisy Jane, this relationship “felt like home.” The relationship inspired Daisy Jane, an artist and writer, to create amazing work. She stated, “all the pieces fit. I thought, for me, the sex made sense. Despite everything that I had been taught and it all made sense to me.” They went to church together and read scriptures together. They made love together.

That’s again just like damnation if you could ever define it as I interpreted it. But I was happy and I wanted it more than anything. And I wanted to stay with her forever and I would have. I think that I would have truly had my family been ok.

When Daisy Jane's family found out, her mother gave her an ultimatum to either end the relationship completely or to move away from the family if she continued it. Devastated by this choice, Daisy Jane could not give up her family. She ended the relationship and sought support from her bishop. While supportive, her ecclesiastical leaders did threaten excommunication if she continued the relationship. She had difficulty ending the relationship because she loved Angie. Once Angie's parents found out about the relationship they immediately enrolled her in a study abroad program and shipped her off to another country. If she could not be with Angie, she needed her religion.

The Honor's Code Office at BYU became aware of the relationship and attempted to punish her by lining her up to finish school at a University in Texas. They held a court with the vice presidents, her activity advisors, and some of her professors. "My bishop and my stake president actually came to BYU and went to bat for me that I was working with them to kind of clear things up and to repent. But BYU was not good." In the end, they allowed her to remain at BYU and finish her degree with at that school.

I was so immersed in the culture. All I knew, the only options that I could see were going back to the Church, graduating from BYU...there was no community that I could ascribe to or be a part of that I was aware of...BYU required me to go to therapy, which I needed anyway. I was heartbroken and devastated and everything else. So LDS social services, I started seeing them. I saw them for about a year. And I tried to, at that time, I tried to make the feelings go away because I was hurt by them. I was hurt by my feelings, I felt betrayed by myself. So at that time I was trying to make them go away.

She decided that she needed to get married and have children. She always wanted children. Robert returned to her life. He had been married once and divorced. They seemed to want the same things in life at this time and even though she really wanted to marry Angie, she agreed to marry Robert. She chose Robert because she could talk to

him and she did not want to go into a marriage with this secret. Daisy Jane had a lot of brotherly love for Robert and could make the sexual piece work. Together they had two children.

Robert had believed that because Daisy Jane had a same-sex relationship that meant she would be willing to be sexually open during their marriage. When marrying Robert, she believed she was recommitting herself to live according to the dictates of the gospel. They began having issues in their marriage. In order to cope, Daisy Jane focused on her work and Robert delved into porn and substance abuse. He used her previous sexual history to control her. Robert, who decided he did not want to work, threatened to share her secret if she did not continue to support him. They were married for 14 years. By the end of the marriage they had stopped having sex and Daisy Jane's mental health deteriorated to the point that she began having seizures.

In order to recover and heal, she left her husband, children, and job and moved to southern Utah. She felt that her sexual orientation made her too mentally ill to be a good mother. For 4 years, her ex-husband did not allow her to have much contact with her children. It devastated Daisy Jane to be away from her children and she stopped attending church because it was too painful to be there without them.

Daisy Jane's doctor had prescribed her Xanax to control her anxiety. Due to her prescribed use, she became addicted and turned to the LDS 12-Step Recovery Program when she felt ready to stop using it. There she began to voice her experience with same-sex sexuality. Daisy Jane is clear that her sexuality is not her addiction. Daisy Jane also stopped hiding her secret from God.

I'm praying and talking with God about all of this, all of my sexuality and situation, and the answers I received to my prayers were that I needed to talk

about it. It was time to just talk about it, time for it just to be out of the open and also that I needed to for my own internal peace I knew that I needed to, to make peace with Angie...because our parting was abrupt and horrible.

Daisy Jane started to heal her relationships. She contacted Angie, who had recently left her Mormon marriage for another woman, and obtained closure. Daisy Jane's children came to stay with her the summer of 2011 and wanted to live with her. She came out to her oldest son so that he could make an informed decision about with whom he wanted to live. He and her youngest son chose to remain with her. Daisy Jane remains active in the Church. She holds a teaching position in Sunday School. She has told her bishop and Relief Society president, the adult women's leader, that she plans on dating women and might have to be released from her calling when she begins a sexual relationship. She still feels tension about having to choose between these two sides of herself, but at this time in her life she is trying to navigate having both. At follow-up Daisy Jane reported that she resigned from her teaching position "to start dating an amazing girl."

### Mel

Mel is a 29-year-old married Caucasian female with a 5-year-old daughter. Mel describes her sexuality as "mostly straight. Like 95%, but about 5% could go the other way." She is still a member of the LDS Church, but has refused to participate because of the Church's political participation in denying equal rights to same-sex couples. She has not been active in Church for about 12 years.

I believe the cores of it. That you know the golden plates and all, the book is true. But what I have a problem with is the way they preach...and the scriptures preach that you should love and accept and be kind, but the Church can donate millions of dollars and say you're wrong and you're not allowed to fall in love with that

person. And there's something wrong with you...that's the final straw for me is that they say you should love your neighbor, unless it's that person. There's something wrong with them. You know love all your neighbors except for this neighbor. That was the breaking point where I said you know what how can you say we're God's people and that you know we're this true religion and, but then say your love is wrong. I don't understand it. It's judgmental and it's wrong. I can't participate in it.

Mel grew up in the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. Her father's family extends generations in the Church to its founding. Her mother's family she describes as anti-Mormons. Her mother converted and Mel's parents raised their children within the LDS Church. Her family's activity level went back and forth.

It went from being like every week if you didn't get out of bed you know I'm going to kick your butt, you got to go to church too. And then a couple of months later there would be a few weeks where everyone was just going to sluff it. It always just went back and forth. Until goll I want to say when I was in 8th or 9th grade that my dad had a thing where they told him to shave his beard or else he shouldn't attend church like that and so he stopped going and...if dad's not going, we're not going.

In 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, Mel recognized attractions to both boys and girls.

I actually had a neighbor who lived behind me that we would go in my room and we would just kind of make out, you know. And it was the girl next door. And then you know I was thinking ok that's weird and I felt bad about it and it was just one of those things where mom never suspects that you're going to be in your room with the girl getting in trouble...And when she moved it just kind of stopped and it never happened again. So it was just basically your moments of awkward staring in the locker rooms at school and you know trying not to get busted looking at the wrong person.

Mel did not know how to interpret this experience because she had never met gay people. At age 5 her parents gave her the sex talk, but her parents had never discussed same-sex sexuality. They simply assumed that Mel would date and marry a man. Her church community did not start discussing sexual relationships until her pre-teen years when they told the youth not to date until they are 16. Her feelings about her same-sex sexuality fluctuated through junior high and high school. Although not attending church,

she became very involved in Seminary “mostly because it's Utah and if you didn't attend seminary, then there's something wrong with you.” She got to the point where she tried to forget that she had ever engaged in same-sex activity. Mel did not really date in high school. She did pretend to date a gay male friend at his request because he did not want his family to suspect his real sexual orientation. She had attractions towards both men and women, but the boys did not want to date her and the girls were straight. She went back and forth being comfortable with her sexuality and then not.

Finally after graduating high school I thought to myself I don't care what anyone else says, it feels right in my heart and it feels right in here. And so that makes it right for me. It doesn't necessarily make it right for someone else, but it makes it right for me.

Mel met her husband when they started a job the same day in 2002. They immediately connected and almost from the start were inseparable. On Sundays he attended church and then had dinner with his family. Mel joined him. Mel felt pressured to be active in the Church and get married in the temple so that she could have the acceptance of his extremely religious family. She maintained activity for about a year. She tried to forget the fact that she ever felt attracted to girls. However, Mel did not like to go to church because she is outspoken about beliefs with which she feels conflict. A few months after they got married, she stopped attending church again.

I just said you know what it feels wrong. I don't like hiding what I feel. And we talked about it and he said, “you know if you're happy, I'm happy. And you seem happy. I don't care what you did in the past as long as we're together in the future.” So he's super supportive.

Mel absolutely loves her husband. She states that he is amazing and supports her no matter what. While she has no interest in ever leaving him, she still acknowledges



same-sex attractions and if she were placed in a position where she was dating again she would be interested in a person's personality and connection to her, not their gender.

She has not told anyone in her church community about her same-sex sexuality, but has talked somewhat about her experiences to her family.

After I graduated high school I sat down with my sisters and said you know do you think it's weird that I've kissed a girl and that I really liked it and that we did it for a long time? And they said so what. No one cares...I've never really liked sat down and told my parents, but they've heard enough snippets to realize that...I can find a girl attractive and I would be willing to kiss a girl if I wasn't in a relationship. But, and they don't have a problem with that so. There's only a few of like my far extended family who are very anti-gay. But I just tell them you're not me and I get to decide for me. You decide for you. And I decide for me. And I decided that I'm okay with it. So I don't care what you think.

Mel does not believe that she can have a relationship with the Mormon Church at this point.

Because I don't think that they're going to change. I don't see that ever happening. You know that's part of their core beliefs in the Bible, that this is wrong and that is wrong. And but I can't change how I feel either. So for me it's kind of a matter of I teach my daughter what I think is right and my husband takes her to church where she learns kind of what I call the fundamentals you know at her age and when she gets to be old enough to decide if I'm right or wrong, she can go to church the rest of her life and be a really religious person and still agree with me, I don't know. She's 5, I've got her whole life. So for me I don't see myself as having a relationship with the church exactly. I'm too set in what I believe and I don't think I can change it. So unless they change were at a stalemate.

### Stargays

Stargays is a 39-year-old single White female who identifies as lesbian and Mormon.

My mother and her husband had me baptized, but I wasn't necessarily raised LDS. I will say first and foremost they're eastern bloc, very blue-collar, very traditional kind of people. And I think that drives their identity more than being Mormon drives their identity. So that's one of the keys there in terms of whether or not

they accept me is that in their frame of reference it's not acceptable to be anything but their version of traditional.

Stargays moved in with her grandparents at the age of 13 and became more involved in the Mormon religion.

When I made that transition I participated more in church activities because of the people that I went to school with and the people in my neighborhood. But still didn't actually attend church a lot. So it wasn't until probably my early 20s, late teens, early 20s something like that, before I started attending regularly. And ended up serving 2 1/2 years as a Relief Society president.

She attempted to conform to the expectation of heterosexual marriage and became engaged to several men because she held:

The traditional typical Mormon belief that when you get to be a certain age in your early 20s, late teens, you get married and you have children and you figure the rest out. And so that was kind of my belief system is that you were supposed to want to be married in the Temple and you're supposed to want to have children and I could never reconcile the two because that was like the furthest thing from my mind. I'd end up getting to the point where we'd plan the wedding and I be looking at dresses and we'd be picking out flowers and I'm like this is not, this is just such a surreal experience, this is not where I should be. And you know after that happens so many times at some point you got to go okay something, something's wrong here. And I honestly thought for the longest time that if I tried hard enough and I looked hard enough and I dated enough guys eventually I'd find one that stuck. Because it had to be them, it couldn't have been me. You know it was there is something wrong with every one of them.

When she “ended up totally head over heels in love with her” best friend, she realized that maybe her relationships with men did not work out because of her, not them. She did not welcome this realization given the homophobia she had internalized from her family and community.

It was like one of those things to find out that I was like a serial killer or something you know. Like you just can't accept it. And so for a very long time I'd be attracted to other women right, but it can't happen. It can't possibly be that way and I have to date these guys and I have to be engaged to these guys and head down this path that everybody else thinks I should head down.

She tried not to date women. “Because it's one thing to admit that you're lesbian and it's another thing to you know be out there actively dating, participating in the community kind of thing.” In order to refocus her attention, she engaged in extensive study of The Book of Mormon. Stargays used to spend 8 hours at church just hanging out and doing whatever needed to be done. She went to the temple often.

Even though not seeking to date women, relationships with close female friends in the Mormon Church developed into romantic and sexual attractions. Becoming sexually intimate with a woman caused an “epiphinal experience. This is why I'm not married. This is it. This is I am definitely gay, definitely a lesbian, definitely not a straight person. Definitely. There can be no more question about it.”

She continued to serve as a Relief Society president. At one event, she ended up outing herself.

And people were not at all happy about that. It was this incredible silence. Very, very uncomfortable for about 10 minutes and nobody said anything. And after that nobody wanted to talk to me, wanted to have anything to do with me, so I joined the Army. And of course in the Army it's a ‘don't ask, don't tell’ scenario so we didn't tell and nobody asked and that was okay, I was okay with that. And then after I got out of basic training, I don't know, I've just not been very active ever since then.

She did, however, work for the Mormon Church for several months in a position that required a temple recommend. She attended some church meetings, but felt more community with women in her neighborhood who identified as lesbian.

I lived in the family ward and I think that was part of what drove me to the lesbian community. Surprisingly. I actually lived in a neighborhood where there are a bunch of us there...So I got hanging out with them more right and I didn't fit in the Ward that I was in because everybody there was married, everybody had kids, they were all like 15 years younger than I was. These happy little Mormon couples and I just didn't belong there.

Stargays also cycled into depression after outing herself at church. Diagnosed with bipolar disorder, she experienced rapid cycling for about 10 years. A depressive episode resulted in her disappearance and her family's discovery of her sexual orientation as they read her emails in search of her whereabouts. Her family found her, brought her home, and helped her to become stabilized. She knows that her family has talked to other and among themselves about her sexuality orientation, but no one has ever talked to her about it and she has never reached out to them to talk about it.

When home again, her father's wife encouraged a neighbor to reach out to Stargays. A romantic relationship developed between her and Stargays.

She and I spent a very long, very painful year trying to avoid each other because she was already with someone. But she was my next-door neighbor and she wouldn't leave me alone. And so she and I ended up having a relationship for about a year, in addition to her partner. That was really awful, awful experience. So when I say I try not to think about it anymore it's because I'm trying to get away from her and get her out of my head and oh my God if I never see another lesbian as long as I live (laughs) it will be too soon. That was just a painful, painful experience. So at this point I just, I try to, I try to avoid it, I try to avoid thinking about it and I try to avoid identifying. I'd totally be okay if I were just not really any gender and not really any sexuality, does that make sense? I know that sounds crazy, but that's kind of how I feel right now.

In order to recover, she moved to the Northwest. She has found a greater sense of balance there because there is not the same community pressure to be perfect as she experienced in the Mormon dominated communities of Utah. Stargays is selectively out to some people and not others. Her family has not responded well to the discovery and their relationship has deteriorated even further than it previously had been due to other circumstances. According to her their view is:

I've been through the Temple, I've taken, endowments, theoretically I know better and yet I still choose to live the life that I do and so for them I eternally lost. There is no hope for me. I'll never be recovered. I've broken all of my promises.

She has, however, accepted herself. The process of sexual identity development and acceptance occurred through:

Just kind of getting used to the fact that was what and who I was and being okay with that. And just not fitting in at church. I mean at some point there had to be something different and I couldn't continue down the path that I was going down, it just wasn't working. And so that's, it didn't matter how much I prayed or how much I went to the Temple or how much Scripture reading I did, it didn't go away. It didn't, I wasn't being healed. Sometimes that's just not the way things work. And so you know at some point you just have to whether it's conscious or not you have to make a decision, you know what this is the way things are and I'm going to have to figure out how to be okay with it and just embrace it and hope for the best.

Although Stargays does not attend church at this time, she still believes in the doctrine and principles of the LDS religion.

Which I know a lot of people have a hard time reconciling that is like how can you be a heathen gay female and still believe the Church is true. The dichotomy can't exist in the same person. And I absolutely disagree with that. At the time and even now, I still believe very strongly in the truth of it. I still believe in the truth of the book of Mormon, in the truth of the gospel, in the men who lead the Church. I know they're not perfect, but they try awful hard. So I think I still for the most part have a very strong testimony about multiple facets of the Mormon Church and the Mormon faith. And I did even then. And I would, I would dare say it's probably stronger now than it was then.

### Aidan

Aidan is a 36-year-old single White female who identifies as Mormon and lesbian. She lived as a man for 5 years, but currently identifies as a woman. She is also comfortable with the label genderqueer or FTM. Her family's history extends to Mormon pioneers who crossed the plains in the 1880s. Born in South Africa to American parents who worked overseas, her family moved back to California when Aidan was 4.

I come from a very creative background. Musical, highly educated, middle-class, not lot of money but a lot of education and a lot of creativity and a lot of talking

about stuff around the table, the Encyclopedia and stuff. So things that weren't talked about very well were sexuality.

Aidan struggled throughout her youth because early on she identified her feelings toward women. A precocious child she read Havelock Ellis at the age of 11 and by the age of 13 began to make the connection that she “was probably one of these mysterious, but downright evil people being a lesbian.” At the same time she felt more like a boy herself and felt angry that she could not have the priesthood. Contrarily, she felt superior being a woman because the boys her age were very immature and used to beat her up. By the age of 16, “it became really clear to me that I was a lesbian.” Between the ages of 12-16, Aidan had attempted suicide a dozen times.

Aidan first revealed her sexual orientation to high school staff. They provided their immediate support and connected her with adults who identified as sexual minorities in order to help her feel more comfortable with herself. In fact, her principal encouraged Aidan to ask a girl out and even gave Aidan “a pink lace ruffle dress. And as a butch this wasn't quite pleasant to me, but she was a good principal. She was trying to get me to go and have fun. So I went with my first girlfriend.”

Aidan continued to have doubts about herself. She could not talk to her parents because their response was that if she just prayed, read the scriptures and went to church she would not feel like a lesbian. Aidan stopped attending church between the ages of 17-27.

I went through almost 10 years of just complete anger at the Church because I was angry that men who I didn't feel were very mature were elevated above me. And I felt like in some ways I was more spiritual, certainly more knowledgeable about scriptural things than any of the men or the boys.

When Aidan left for college she began experimenting sexually and participated in the leather community. She became involved with a lot of people in the scene, some of whom were really bad people and some of whom were pretty decent people. The leather community allowed her to ability to create a controlled scene.

I can transfer my frustrations with the priesthood leaders in the Church and my parents and society having control over me and forcing me, trying to force me to not be gay or trying to force me to be a little domestic fem. I can try to channel that into seeing the woman who I am with in a SM relationship into seeing her as that authority and in some ways because she is, in some ways she is a more benevolent authority and she's benevolent because you can tell her what your limits are and you can tell her to stop. You cannot tell the Church to stop. You can't tell your parents, you can't tell society, you cannot tell anybody else to stop hurting you. Stop it. You cannot tell the universe that. They will not listen. But you can tell your SM partner what your limits are and what you need. And if she's doing SM the way that she ought to do she will hurt you in the ways that you want to be hurt and she will stop and she will respect your limits. And at the end she will love you, she will show you love, she will hold you, hug you, kiss you.

At the same time, Aidan did not want to be a woman. She really hated her female body. The conflict Aidan felt because of a patriarchal church fueled her unhappiness at being a woman. She thought that maybe if she became a man everything would be better and she would feel better. At the age of 22, she started taking testosterone. The day she received her first shot thought she would see an angel or a flash of lightening if she was not meant to do this. Nothing dramatic occurred. She bound her chest and lived as a man for 5 years.

Aidan moved to the Northeast to pursue her graduate education. There she met a married woman and began a relationship. After 5 years of dealing with men's restrooms and seeing how men relate to each other, she realized that men where not as perfect as she had been lead to believe. She saw that both genders had disadvantages, men because

they are told to shove down their emotions and women because they are told that they cannot be strong. Aidan decided to stop taking testosterone. Her reason:

My ex-girlfriend. It really is her largely who started to, I had the therapist as well, but she made me feel so loved that and we talked about these gender issues a lot and she was very supportive, but at the same time she said to me that she thought that...I had started down the FTM world not because I felt that I was a man trapped in a woman's body but because I grew up with the sense that being female was less valued and important than being male. And she's, she's right because I grew up with that feeling partially because of the Church, partly because of society in general, and partially because the Church has such an emphasis on priesthood. I thought that this was just unfair that women could not have it and no theory of justification has ever satisfied me...gradually I kind of felt like yeah she's right that I was making, I had made this decision because I was just trying to deal with my own self as a woman.

Aidan states that she is still genderqueer in a way and many people still use the male pronoun when referring to her.

I still have a physically female body. I'd never gotten the surgeries. There are some residual permanent things that the hormones caused, but my passport still says male and my drivers license says female. I'm still an in between thing. But I've become more comfortable with my female body. And for me the sexuality goes a lot with being comfortable being in your body, being in that gender that you are.

Prior to Aidan's transition back to female, she decided to return to the Mormon Church. She had attended many other denominational services and experimented with different religions, but still she felt that she was Mormon and would always be Mormon.

My decision gradually was I really missed parts of Mormonism. I really missed feeling that I am part of the group, the group that I was raised with. I also felt, I missed the ritual, not that there's a whole lot of ritual in the Mormon churches, but there is some and I missed that and I missed that okay everyone knows the Jell-O jokes. I miss that everyone knows what I mean when I use the term Ward or when they use the term investigator or...everyone knows who I mean when I say Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. So I missed some of that cultural thing, being part of the group, part of the family.



Not only did Aidan miss the community, she also missed the beliefs that she still held in the religion.

I also started to feel that I shouldn't be kept away from believing what I believe about Mormonism and being in a church that believes in Jesus Christ and the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith. And I felt I should not be kept away from those central beliefs because those are also my beliefs. And I should not allow any body to tell me no you cannot come to church or you can't be active in the church because you're a lesbian. That was that decision it was also the decision not to tell people unless I had to. I don't want them to tell me that I can't.

Aidan returned to church while still living as a man. When considering what to do about her gender transition, she approached her bishop to talk. He had thought that Aidan was a gay man. She came out as a lesbian woman. Her bishop told her that they were happy to have her in the male only Sunday School service as a gay man, but now she could no longer attend that session and had to attend the woman's group. Aidan has not come out to subsequent bishops because she does not want to be told that she cannot practice her religion as she sees fit. Some members of her ward know about her gender transition and sexual orientation. Most have been supportive or at least cordial towards her.

Aidan continues to participate in the Mormon Church as much as she is able while still honoring her need to be lesbian. She also alternatively attends Anglican or Catholic services depending on her emotional need.

Because I have a lot of different needs for religion and they cannot be met with one system. They just can't be. I lost that ability. I lost that ability when I was 16 and came out and realized that the Mormon Church wouldn't satisfy all of me.

Aidan is no longer together with her girlfriend. She desires a close intimate relationship, but worries that her Mormon background might be a hindrance. She finds

that sexuality within a good relationship causes her to feel better about her spirituality with God because something does not feel missing within her.

Aidan has a thoughtful, sensitive, and gentle spirit. She continues to struggle with periods of self-doubt and questioning whether she can really be saved even though she engages in homosexual behaviors. When other negative issues occur in life, her doubt in her self-worth flairs. Her most recent suicide attempt occurred a couple of weeks prior to our interview.

But my story is really one of pain and trying to continue to live and try to continue to be productive despite massive amounts of emotional and physical pain... Whatever made this way, we don't know, but the point is I am this way. So the decision to try to contribute to this world despite or because is sometimes a daily or weekly decision that I have.

### Quinn

Quinn is a 41-year-old Caucasian partnered female who identifies as lesbian. At this time she continues to identify as Mormon, although she has been recently excommunicated. Quinn describes her family as a multigenerational Mormon family. Her parents raised her in Southern California. In the early 90s, she got married to the first man with whom she had ever been in a serious relationship. "He was very, very good looking and I think I was infatuated with that. And I was naïve, I mean he had so many issues that I was too naïve to see because I had never had a serious relationship with a boy." Their marriage lasted for only 4 months because her husband abused her. She felt supported through that trial because she could cling to her belief in the Savior. Although her bishop at the time did question what she did to cause her husband to become violent enough to put her in the hospital.

A student at BYU she continued with her studies and soon after her divorce met a woman, Lynda, who became her friend and then her lover.

I always had a group of girlfriends, always. I mean I always have my whole life. I mean if I look at the patterns, I've always had a group of like 3 or 4 girlfriends and we were really, really good friends. And she had just come home from her mission and she was in some classes at BYU with us and she said she would just watch me and so I kind of invited her to become part of that. And our relationship just continued to intensify and I remember the first time I like, I think I held her hand or something like that. It was just like oh my gosh I think this is what you are supposed to be feeling with the guy that I never feel.

Quinn states that she thought that the relationship was cause-and-effect from her abusive marriage. She reports being absolutely in love with Lynda. Despite their happiness together, Lynda broke up with Quinn because other people had found out about their relationship and Lynda's bishop threatened to excommunicate her. Quinn did not receive the same response from her bishop, but the relationship ended because Lynda did not want to put her eternal salvation at risk. Quinn engaged in the formal repentance process.

I just remember not taking the sacrament and not going to the temple, reading the Miracle of Forgiveness, reading some scriptures, but I never felt like it was wrong, but I was being told but it was. So I was trying to do the right thing. Like I was trying to follow church counsel and advice.

They both moved on to form heterosexual relationships because that is what their culture expected them to do. Quinn reflects:

I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her...I was devastated. I mean it took me years and years and years where I wouldn't dream about it anymore, think about it anymore. And I actually reached out to her the first year that I was married and she wasn't ready to talk to me at that point, she was still married. But there was always that curiosity factor because we never really had closure. It was just like this super intense, and I remember one of the last things that she told me was "I'm still in love with you. I can't be around you because I'm still in love with you." You know and that just killed me because it was like I never had that kind of emotional and physical bond with anyone. I mean I never wanted to be apart, ever. So it devastated me.

Quinn continued to have close emotional relationships with women, but did not form another sexual relationship. Six years after this relationship she marries again. She married a man that she thought would be kind, would not be abusive, and would be a good father. She desired to have children, which meant the only legitimate option could be heterosexual marriage. Quinn did not experience the emotional bond or sexual drive with her husband that she had felt in her relationship with Lynda.

Quinn continued to be very active in the Mormon Church. She and her husband adopted two children together. Quinn served in many major church callings in her ward. She became friends with another woman, Kathy, in the ward and for two years they developed a strong emotional attachment to each other. She describes their relationship as, “we were cuddle-me relationship friends if that makes sense. Like we would find every excuse to go hold each other in the book. But I never kissed her and we never had inappropriate touching.” Quinn states that they eventually crossed a line and Quinn confessed to the bishop. Her friend’s responded to the experience by withdrawing. Quinn found this very painful and turned to an openly lesbian friend, Marcia, on her soccer team for support. Quinn did not want to put herself or her husband through that experience again. With Marcia’s help, Quinn unpacked her feelings and realized that her patterns with women demonstrated her lesbian orientation.

One day while hiking with Marcia, their hands brushed and electricity she had never felt before made Quinn realize that she was in trouble. They had fallen in love. Quinn for the first time in her life analyzed her sexual identity and what would be the right relationship for her regardless of the family picture that the Church portrayed. She decided to come out to her husband.

I said that I thought I was gay...I don't think I was quite ready to tell him, but I felt the pressure that I couldn't put him through another Kathy again. And so I told him, I don't think I was ready and you know I mean then the whole apocalypse started. It was horrible.

Her husband told their ecclesiastical leaders and her family. She battled with her feelings as everyone else in her life tried to convince her to remain with her husband and continue in the Church. Prior to coming out to her husband, she had not engaged in a sexual relationship with Marcia.

I remember there was a time after soccer that she kissed me in the car the first time and I didn't kiss her back for like half an hour, never kissed her back that night. And she thought oh gosh I just completely put myself out there and all I could think of was the minute that I kiss her I'm done. I've made my decision. That's all I could think of. I'm done. My church membership will be out the door. My family will be gone. I'm done. Two days later I kissed her. I couldn't help it. It was just so, what I was feeling was just too much a part of who I was.

Once the relationship became sexual the Church considered Quinn to be having an affair and her bishop moved quickly to excommunicate her. Because Quinn's decision affected her marriage and children, she struggled to know the right course and considered breaking up with Marcia multiple times.

I mean I think a lot of it was if I was not a member of the Church the decision would have been very, very easy for me. I would have never broken up with her one time. Never. As I think I had that big Church conflict of oh my gosh am I going to, and this was a true thought in my head, am I going to go to hell for this. You know, am I going to lose my eternal salvation for this. I mean that was something I have really struggled with.

For 3 months, Quinn engaged in a lot of prayer, research, and consideration. The pressure and messages that she received from her husband, family, friends, and bishop caused her to feel like she was being ripped apart.

I think I was just going through this intense inner conflict. It was literally a battle where I felt like at one point I was battling Satan, but then I realized that am I battling Satan or am I battling myself and who I am?...And once I...accepted that in myself I thought gosh you know there really is no other option. For me to go

and say I'm not gay is a lie and that would be a lie to myself that I couldn't live with. For me to go back and stay in a relationship with a person that I wasn't in love with was not fair to my children and was not fair to him or to me, so to anyone involved. For me to live a life of celibacy, that's just sad. You know and I had this wonderful girl who just kept telling me, "All I want to do is love you. Will you just let me love you?"

Quinn choose to let Marcia love her. She left her husband and experienced a painful excommunication process that involved going through the Church disciplinary court. Quinn and Marcia moved in together. They share custody of Quinn's daughters and Marcia's toddler twins with their ex-partners. Quinn's oldest daughter is aware of her sexual orientation and supportive of her mother's relationship. Quinn's relationship with the Church is tenuous at best. If she goes to church, she goes alone and due to the requirements of her excommunication is not able to participate fully (she cannot go to the temple, take the sacrament, or pay tithing). She reports feeling homeless from the loss of her religious community. She is attempting to figure out her own path to maintain her spirituality.

I've always had a strong testimony. Like I've always had a strong relationship with my Savior, like a testimony of the Church, but just trying to redefine that and re-examined that as lesbian. And how it all fits because there are some things that don't fit anymore. You know like the idea of an eternal family, an eternal exultant family being a God and a Goddess in a heterosexual relationship. You know where does that fall for us now? Like and they're just answers that I don't have that maybe someone further along in the process has figured out for themselves, but I'm still in that discovery phase.

### Rebecca

Rebecca is a 38-year-old Caucasian woman who is actively in the process of reassessing her sexual and religious identity. At the first interview, Rebecca was married to her husband of over 13 years and unsure of her sexual identity. A month later, she

identified as lesbian and had separated from her husband, now just waiting for the final divorce.

Rebecca grew up in Idaho. She has experienced same-sex attractions since the age of 12. She did not participate in any same-sex activity because she believed the Church to be true. Her parents were not active and smoked pot. Her father was violent and abusive. Between the ages of 16-20, she stopped attending church and began smoking and drinking. She reactivated at 20 because she did not like the way her life was going.

I just had this strong feeling that I needed to come back. I came back and, and became strong, and got, put my papers in to go on a mission and served a mission for 18 months. And when I was serving, you know, I felt yeah this is true and you know I could tell it was making a difference in people's lives.

She experienced some attractions to a companion on her mission and felt broken. She never told anyone about her feelings of same-sex attraction. Rebecca returned home with the dream to have the LDS marriage and family. She met her husband on a blind date, but the second encounter sparked the connection between them.

I never enjoyed dating other men. I never, I prayed about marrying my husband and I believe that the answer was yes. As for being madly deeply in love with a man, I've never experienced that...I wanted to fulfill the expectations of a Mormon woman...get married in the Temple, have children.

Their communication in their marriage has always been difficult. They both suffered with low self-esteem, her “because of these underlying issues of you know SSA and [I] don't know what to do about it.” They have had their good moments, but most of the 10-year relationship has been a struggle. Together they had 3 children.

A woman, Tina, from their ward moved in with Rebecca's family and lived with them for 3 ½ years. From the moment that they met, Rebecca knew that she loved her.

They shared a platonic relationship until just before Tina was about to move out.

Rebecca confessed her feelings. Tina returned those feelings.

This woman lived with us and I fell in love with her. We both found love with each other. And I was going to leave with her and I did leave with her. And I left my kids and my husband notes, everything. I left because I felt like I was not good enough to have my children because of my issues and that they would be better with their father and so I just up and left and went to [a different state]. And I actually came back 3 days later realizing that I had made a mistake leaving my kids...I came back and I've been trying to work on these issues since.

The moment from confessing their love to each other, to running away together, to returning to her family in Idaho occurred within a week's time period. She came to back to her life with her husband because his family threatened to deny her access to her children.

When I came back I had one of my sister-in-law's she's like, "What you did was just pure evil. Just evil." And I'm like okay. So I don't know, I don't know if I'm evil or not. I don't believe I am. I don't feel like an evil person.

Rebecca confessed to her bishop who placed her on unofficial probation.

However when this time period ended and she tried to get her temple recommend back from the stake president, he stated that the bishop had handled the situation incorrectly and placed her on official probation. Her and Tina engaged in another brief affair. Her ecclesiastical leaders discussed excommunicating her, instead they disfellowshipped her for 2 years. During this the past year she has tried to live according to her religious beliefs, but struggled because:

Trying to love somebody that you don't love. Trying to be something that you're not sure that you can be anymore. Trying to live the values that you're not sure you can live anymore. Having people judge you is very, very hard. Having his family judge, my husband's family judge me has been, it's been very, very difficult. There have been moments where I have wanted to end my life actually because of it...You always feel imperfect. And so depression is a big thing you know at least for me, it's a big thing because I can't understand what's going on you know. I can't understand why these feelings are coming even though you're



living the gospel to the T...you still have these feelings you can't. And then you have a branch president or a stake president 'well if you live the gospel, you won't have these feelings anymore.' I'm just like well, I've been doing it for years and I can tell you it doesn't stop. So I don't understand. I just don't understand it. I don't understand how they can promise you something that will never cease.

At the time of our first interview, Rebecca was considering a divorce because of the conflict in her marriage and the fact that her feelings for Tina never waned. She felt that the situation was unfair to both herself and her husband, both of whom deserved healthy, loving relationships. By the second interview Rebecca appeared happier and more certain of herself. She had officially ended her marriage and felt excited to begin her life with Tina. She has not shared yet with others that she and Tina are a couple. Her and her ex-husband are trying to jointly co-parent their children. Her husband has the children on Sundays and takes them to church. She does not attend church because of her work schedule. She worries about influencing her children's relationship with the Church and does not want to sway them because of her action. Rebecca is in the process of reconciling her beliefs with the love she feels for Tina. "I just know that it's hard to understand if it's wrong or not, does that make sense. It's just you know how can you fall in love with someone so deeply and it be wrong." Rebecca no longer believes all the tenants of her previous LDS beliefs. She does continue to believe that God loves her, regardless of the gender of her partner.

I've tried the first 37 years of my life to ignore it. I mean it's not real just prayed it away. Pray and ask God to help you over and over again...I think I'm coming into an era where I think I'm going to be okay with dealing with it completely. Instead of dealing with it, living it. Just being okay with it, being okay with who I am. Being okay with this is just how it is.

She and Tina plan to wait a year before announcing their relationship so that her children first have time to adjust to the divorce. Rebecca loves Tina deeply and has faith

that they will be together until they die. She is grateful for the “very happy, healthy relationship” that she now has.

### Nicole

Nicole is a 27-year-old single Caucasian female who at the time of our interview identified as Mormon and same-sex attracted. Nicole’s same-sex attraction has been a recent development. “I had the divorce about a year ago and since then I'm kind of discovering myself, discovering what I like, discovering what I don't like.”

Nicole spent her youth in Southern California and then Utah. She describes her family as mainstream, conservative Mormons. She believes her mother is “more open minded, but at the same time more into the whole Mormon culture.” She finds her father more judgmental and strict in his beliefs, while at the same time not doing much besides attending church once a week. Growing up, Nicole went to church on Sunday and attended young women social activities during the week.

Nicole did not fully internalize the teachings of the Church and merely followed her family and peer group because “this is what being a Mormon is and this is what they do.” The one belief she did hold firmly is that God loves her, knew her needs, knew what she was going through, and He understood her. Despite the love she felt from God, she always felt pressured by her religious community to meet needs that she felt she could meet. She had bishops tell her she did not have enough faith. They told her that she did not pray hard enough, she did not read her scriptures intently enough, that she did not give it her all. Yet, Nicole felt she did the best that she could.

They always kind of sensed something was off about me and at age 14 I had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and so I kind of figured okay that's me. That's

why, that's why I'm different or that's why. And so they always kind of put that against me saying, you know "your feelings are totally invalidated because you have this mental illness." And so I was always told that I didn't know how to love. I didn't know how to be Christ-like. I didn't know, yeah I just didn't know. And so it kind of just made me feel lost.

Nicole very much identified with other girls growing up. She dated boys in junior high, but has only had two serious relationships with men.

It never really occurred to me oh I could be gay you know. Because I was, all my life I was boy crazy. I was chasing boys on the playground and just in junior always asking my friends so does this is guy like me, does this guy like me...But my relationships never really were very, we were never really on the same page. Ever. And I always felt different. I didn't know why and I always felt like something was missing.

She states that her boyfriends did not treat her right and she thought that was what was missing. She believed that if she found the right guy who treated her well, then everything would be ok. She felt very angry toward men for a very, very long time. Even in her relationships she would think, "men are so stupid," even though they acted like they knew everything. Nicole did not like how men treated women. She thought that they tried to push her around by claiming authority.

Her first boyfriend emotionally abused her. Despite her considering it a serious relationship, he would tell her that they "we're just friends, but we kiss and stuff." They engaged in some sexual behaviors. "We didn't have intercourse or anything, but we did other things and he was very gentle in that sense. And I liked that about him. I think it was because he was, I don't know, he was kind of womanly about it and that's what I liked." She states that this boyfriend was more into foreplay and cared about what she wanted in their sexual relationship.

She watched as her friends got married in the Temple and had babies. She felt like she was in a race and also needed to find someone to marry. She felt unable to leave her relationship with her first boyfriend.

I felt trapped in the relationship with this man and I felt like if I didn't have him that I would be, I would just die pretty much. And not, not really because I wanted to be with him forever because I knew I didn't, but I just didn't want, I don't know I was kind of, I was just scared. And so I met this man who I later married and I kind of just was like okay if I marry this guy, I will be married. I will make others happy and I will be out of this relationship with this other man.

Her marriage lasted 6 months. He was more aggressive than her previous boyfriend and did not take her sexual needs into consideration. Although she had engaged in sexual play with her first boyfriend, they had not had intercourse. She did not enjoy having sex with her husband. In fact, parts of sex repulsed her.

Prior to their marriage, Nicole did not realize that her husband held delusions about the Church. He believed that he could heal people. They went to church together, but he made the Mormon Church seem like a “weird creepy cult.”

He was violent and, he was mainly spiritually violent. He's very, he's crazy. He, you know, he would tell me I corrupted him, that I was Satan's child and just horrible, horrible things. And I kind of was kind of falling into believing that and no, this, no. I know I'm a good person you know and so I started standing up for myself and that's when it started getting violent and so I had to break away from that.

Nicole took the steps to get a divorce. Her husband had been threatening divorce constantly because he wanted her to be a different person, but Nicole knew he would never follow through on his threats. After her divorce, “I felt shattered. Not because I felt like he broke my heart, but he broke my sense of who I thought I was.” She experienced a very bad depressive episode. She stayed in bed all day and stop going to

church because she no longer felt comfortable there and wanted nothing more to do with it. Nicole felt very, very angry toward men.

I was masturbating one night and I was just like I'm in control I...can move the way I want to, I can, this is great. And this is the first time I had had like a real whoa orgasm you know. And then afterward I was, I was just like I want someone to hold me...And I wanted a woman to hold me and to touch me and kiss me.

At first Nicole assumed that the thought resulted from the depression and believed that this desire would go away; however, the more she tried to suppress it, the stronger it became. Soon Nicole met a new woman at a counseling group. She felt strongly attracted toward this woman, but could not and did not want to pursue a relationship because of the rules of the group and knowing this woman was in a vulnerable position. Her attractions caused her to realize that her desires were real. She had thought that “lesbians grew up as tomboys and they didn't date a lot...they always kind of knew.” She started doing research. She found stories other women who have had similar experiences to her. Nicole then reviewed her past to seek evidence of same-sex sexuality in her life.

Looking back I mean I've kept diaries since I was 8 and you know having this time to myself I've just kind of thought of different things that have happened to me and trying to put all the missing pieces together and I looked back and there's little, there's little hints that I always kind of felt this way.

Hints like being aroused by a lesbian sex scene on TV. When she asked her mother about the feeling she had, her mother told her “Don't worry about it. Don't think about it. It's bad.” Another hint that Nicole found documented in a relationship to a close female friend in high school. Nicole wrote in her journals about how they would hold hands and tell people they were lesbians in order to get attention. She records her heartbreak and jealousy as this friend began dating. Nicole wrote “about how much I felt like I was losing a partner more than a friend.” Despite recognizing hints of same-sex

sexuality throughout her life, Nicole also believes that her feels have strengthened since her negative relationships with men.

Nicole did not understand how her feelings felt so right, when she had been told her entire life that these feelings were so wrong and should cause shame and guilt. Instead she felt her Heavenly Father's love stronger than ever. She prayed about her feelings.

Heavenly Father what do I do? What do I do? And I felt like He was just, He said, "Do what makes you happy. That's all I care about. I want you to be happy." And so I'm like okay my family is just going to have to accept it.

Nicole first came out to her mother. Her mother did not respond in the way that Nicole had expected. Her mother had called because she felt worried about Nicole and wanted to know what was wrong. In jest, her mother asked her if she was gay. When Nicole did not respond her mother started crying and upon confirmation immediately ended the call due to her distress. Their relationship has been strained since. Her mother avoids the topic of same-sex sexuality. This has been painful for Nicole because she wants to share with her mother, one of her best friends, what she is experiencing and learning.

By the time of our second interview, Nicole had also come out to her father. She came out first via email. He responded with love and encouraged her to talk to him if she needed because he would be there for her. Coming out to her father has "actually brought us closer together because he's just grateful that I was able to come to him with my feelings and, and just accept myself for who I was, who I am." Nicole is not planning to come out to her siblings quite yet.

Nicole has only attended church a couple of times for family related events since her divorce. She states going to church has been “very, very hard because I feel nauseated the whole time. I feel panicked inside.” She is still trying to sort out what she believes and whether she still wants to be part of the Mormon Church.

Nicole wants a relationship with a woman and is actively trying to pursue dating partners, in addition to finding resources in the LGBT community. In January of 2012, Nicole had her first date with a woman. This experience reaffirmed her sexual orientation. Their intimate encounters made her realize “Oh, so sex can be pleasurable! This is what I've been missing out on all this time?” In March, Nicole experienced her first lesbian relationship. “Even holding hands just felt right.” She posted her relationship status to Facebook and her sister, who had not know about her sexual orientation, became very angry at her and they still do not talk much to this day. Nicole has come out to a few more extended family members and has been surprised at their supportive responses. That relationship did not last and Nicole continues to struggle with meeting potential dating partners. As for her relationship with the Mormon Church, “I am going to be removing my name from the Church since it has always been a negative experience in my life.”

#### Jessica

Jessica is a 23-year-old single Caucasian female who identifies as lesbian. She grapples with her religious identity. While she does not identify with the faith, she technically remains a member of the LDS Church and will sometimes attend services with her family when she visits them. She describes herself as nonpracticing LDS or

Mormon. Her family raised her within the Mormon faith and continues to actively participate in the religion. In Jessica's childhood, she and her family lived in Asia for 5 years. She went to an all-girls Catholic school. Her family attended an English-speaking ward (congregation).

I was very close to everyone in the Ward like I was kind of, I was very sheltered because [of my disability] and so everyone kind of, I was kind of like the ward pet. Like everyone loved me...I think they liked me as a person, but like I think they saw me as like an inspiration...I knew everybody and I definitely had a sense of community with the ward there.

Until 6<sup>th</sup> grade Jessica did not realize that gay and lesbian people existed. Like most people, she assumed heterosexuality was the only option. This bubble burst when people started talking about wanting two male characters in an anime to be together romantically.

And I was like wait, what? My parents, we had never talked about it before. And just instantly I got this feeling that it was kind of taboo and I didn't bring it up with anyone.

Her family moved back the States during Jessica's teenage years. Her community changed drastically. She now attended a large public high school in a suburban area in the Salt Lake Valley in Utah where she did not seem able to make friends. She did not experience the same connection to her new ward.

The Mormon faith outside of Utah is very different from the Mormon faith inside of Utah. Here is very much like very, it almost seems cult-like here. And outside of Utah it seems...it's not so much of your identity.

Prior to her junior year, she attended a LDS-Church sponsored summer camp. There she experienced a connection with her camp counselor. She felt attracted to the counselor's personality and to the fact that "she treated me like very normally and I had not really experienced that really." This crush caused Jessica to experience a tailspin



when she returned home because she did not know what these feelings meant. She did not know if the feelings made her gay or bisexual because she thought she had experienced crushes on boys, although very effeminate males. Jessica began researching gay teen sites on her computer. Her parents knew that something was wrong. They asked her to tell them and promised they would not be mad. They then took her laptop and found the websites that she had been reading. They grounded her from the computer.

Jessica felt anger at their reaction. She attempted to process her sexuality and religious beliefs on her own. Because her moodiness continued for several months, they took her computer again and read the online journal that she kept.

I just turned 17, I was very angry, very sarcastic trying to figure out my identity. To this day I have not gone back and read the entries that they read because they read them back to me in like this very mocking tone of voice. I think they were most upset about the fact that I was swearing and taking the Lord's name in vain. I'm like wait that's what you're focusing on here, really? They made me talk to our bishop the next day.

Jessica had no assistance in figuring out her identity. She knew that other kids at school identified as LGB, but she did not know how to seek them out. Her only confidante was an instructor at the school who blurred the boundaries of an appropriate student/teacher relationship. She talked to him because she had no one else with whom she could talk. He added confusion to her identity process.

He would scoff at me, "You can't know if you're gay, you haven't had enough experiences with both sexes." Because I had, had very little experience with guys at that time as well. Like I don't even think I had kissed one yet.

Her parents too have questioned whether her attractions to females were because she has not had much experienced with males outside of her family. In order to give Jessica heterosexual experiences, Jessica's father asked one of the young men in the ward to ask Jessica to go to the prom. This awkward date just made her identify further with

her feelings toward same-sex sexuality. Jessica does not believe that her same-sex sexuality is caused by lack of relationships with men.

I feel like my you know my definition of attraction is very different from other people's definitions of attraction because [of my disability]. So I definitely get attracted to a person's personality and mannerisms. I don't know, it's hard to say. I feel like it's a very hard thing to define...I have I mean in all honesty I've had very few sexual relationships with either gender. So it's hard to say on a physical level. So my sexuality is very much based on like emotions and how I feel when I'm around someone. Like just how they make me feel and our interactions with one another.

She graduated high school and went to a private college on a scholarship. She stopped attending church while living in the dorms. She came out to others at school and did not experience negative reactions. She did well her first semester, but by the second semester she fell apart due to issues from her past. Because of her low GPA she lost her scholarship and had to leave school.

Jessica moved back in with her parents. At first they forced her to attend church. Jessica fell into depression because of the stifling nature of her parent's home and her dependence on her family. She thought of suicide as a way to escape because it was the one thing she could control.

Jessica sought support from people she met online. She began chatting with a woman who also identified as lesbian. They developed a close relationship. Jessica fell in love with this woman, the one positive aspect occurring in her life at this time. Unfortunately, the relationship ended in betrayal and heartbreak.

Jessica came out to her mother. Her mother banned her from telling her siblings. Her mother also had her read articles on lds.org. Jessica felt horrible about herself after reading these statements on homosexuality from the LDS Church. Her mother told her father because Jessica fears the emotionally hurtful things her dad will say when he is

angry. He has only one made one statement about her sexuality when she asked them why they could not accept her. “My dad’s like, ‘What? That you're a lesbian?’ And he like scoffed the word with, I cannot like replicate like the amount of disdain he had, like it was very mocking.”

Jessica moved out into her own apartment and is currently attending a State University. She no longer attends church and her family does not try to force because of the distress she experiences at church. She does not know what she believes at this time, but does believe that the Church cannot be true based on the way that it has treated LGB people. She has dated a couple of women, but has not made a lasting connection. She has kissed women, but is still a virgin. At this time in her life, she is focusing on building community outside of her family and being more confident in herself because she fears that no one will want to be in a relationship with her if she appears helpless.

### Chris

Chris is a 48-year-old single Caucasian woman who identifies as lesbian and at the time of our interviews was actively seeking a life partner. Chris still identifies as Mormon, but does not attend church. Chris’ father died when she was 5 and her mother re-married to man who had children of his own from a previous marriage. They had a blended family of 17 children and raised the children in a strict Mormon household in Northern Utah. Chris strove to be the perfect person that the Church taught women to be. Chris especially felt a responsibility to her mother to be the type of person that her mother raised her to be.

Chris dated a lot of guys in high school and college. She stated she was “very, very popular.” She remembers not understanding why she and her date were the only ones not making out. In college she came close to becoming engaged, but broke off the relationship because she “freaked out” at the thought of marrying a man. Chris focused on her schoolwork and on her game; she played on a sports team in undergrad. One day while in the training room, a teammate came up to her and kissed her.

And I was like WOW. This is what I have been missing. So that’s when I knew, I was like wow this is amazing. I mean all the bells and whistles went off in my whole body. So I went to my mother and I said mom...Melody kissed me. And she’s like ‘what!’ And I said mom, and I just got all tingly, I said, “I loved it.” And mom freaked out. And told me to go see the bishop immediately. So I did.

Chris sought counseling through LDS Social Services. She found this experience horrible. “And of course everything was pray, pray, pray, get on your knees, fasting and prayer.” For 2 years, Chris followed this guidance. An assistantship then took Chris to BYU for her graduate work. Chris did not like being at BYU at all. She dated, but felt very naïve about men and what constituted a romantic relationship. Upon graduation, Chris moved to Texas for her first professional job. There she hired an assistant, Carrie, and the two quickly became close friends.

So anyway bottom line is I start talking to her about the Church and she just loved it. And one night and it was such a confusing, because we were falling in love, but we didn't have a word for it. And it really happened. It was magically innocent. But my brother was on a mission and he sent a cassette tape of his testimony because I was like totally like doing the missionary work with her. And we were sitting on my bed in my apartment listening to my brother and he, and I swear to you I felt the spirit and she did too. But it was the weirdest thing and...we just started crying and next thing you know she got on top of me and we just made out like, it was amazing...We were in love. We were totally in love. Absolutely, I was in love with her.

For 8 months they basked in their love. Carrie had not recognized her same-sex sexuality prior to Chris and felt grateful for Chris for showing her who she was. They attended church together, secretly holding hands when sitting in the pews. Carrie decided that she wanted to get baptized. In her baptismal interview, the bishop asked her if she ever had sex with a woman. Carrie admitted that she did and with whom. The bishop then called Chris in for an interview and threatened her with excommunication. Chris experienced anxiety and panic attacks fueled by the fear of going to hell. She broke up with Carrie and moved to a different State because she could not be near Carrie without touching her. Chris felt absolutely heartbroken.

Chris recommitted herself to living according to the Church. She set a goal not to be gay and focused on her religious activity and her career. Chris went through the temple, mostly to prove to her mother that she remained committed to their eternal family. She attended the single adult ward.

And I was really, really active. They immediately put me in the relief society presidency, which was ridiculous and I hated it. But I was again, I have always been very popular. Always. So people would come to me for everything and the guys dated me like crazy. I dated, it was just ridiculous, I was dating like 3 times a week different guys.

In a matter of weeks of going through the temple, Lila, an open lesbian, came to visit her father who served in a leadership position in Chris' ward. They immediately connected and began a sexual relationship. Since they did not live in the same state, their relationship remained casual and they would hook up any time Lila came to town. Chris felt what she calls the "guilties" during this time.

Chris then met Heather, another teacher. Chris fell hook, line, and sinker. Heather also came from Utah and had been through the temple. After being together for

a year, they decided to buy a house together. The night that Chris put down her portion of the down payment, she experienced a severe panic attack.

Because up until this point I had still been going to church, but I was messing around with her and trying to live two lives and not telling anyone about her, about Heather. But buying the house together just was a huge commitment and I couldn't deal with it...and I was in bed with her sleeping and that night, and all of a sudden this blanket, this dark, dark, dark, dark, dark blanket of just evil fear came over me and I started to shake in bed and bawl like a baby. I was just bawling and bawling and bawling and to the point that I actually started to vomit. And Heather was like what is going on? And all I could spit out was I can't get this house with you. Because all I was thinking was I am making a lifetime commitment to being a lesbian if I buy this house with her. You know, this is a huge commitment. And my family is going to freak out, my mom is going to hate it, I'm going to go to hell. Every time I have anxiety attacks...it's because I think I am going to go to hell. And my dad died when I was 5 so everything is hinged on that. You know if you ever want to see dad again, you better be celibate. And that, that right there has been the hardest thing in my life. The hardest thing in my life. If you want to see dad again, then you can't have love in your life basically. So ever time I've had a girlfriend, I've literally thought I am making a decision here between my eternal family, nieces, nephews, dad, and this woman, whoever it would be at the time.

Chris experienced a complete breakdown and became suicidal. She took some medications to control the anxiety, but the side effects caused her to be unable to eat exacerbating her physical symptoms. Chris received multiple priesthood blessings from her bishop who knew about her same-sex sexuality. She had difficulty functioning at work. Eventually her employer told her that she needed help. Chris took a couple of weeks off and went to Utah, seeking the nurturing care of her mother. It took six weeks to find the right antidepressant that controlled her anxiety.

During this time of recovery, Heather returned to her former lover because she could not deal with the anxiety. Once Chris got stronger, she said that she never again would let a good woman go because of the Church. Chris returned to her home and began a relationship with another woman, Jamie. This relationship lasted for 4.5 years.

This will get weird, but she says she is not gay and yet we had sex. We were together, but it was all me doing her. She wouldn't reciprocate. But I was crazy in love with her. I really was. We traveled together. We spent all of our time together. Like every single night she would come over or I would go over there and we would mostly cuddle, but it was kind of like, it was like I felt that mom was happy with it because she wasn't really gay. And so mom was like ok this is a good decision for you. So I still felt like I was making mom happy. And, but then last year we broke up because it was, she wants kids and a husband and all that and of course that's not me.

Chris has been using online dating for the past year trying to find the right woman for her. She is trying to get mother used to the idea that she plans to make a life-long commitment to another woman. Due to members' actions in a same-sex marriage initiative in her State and the statements by Church leader against individuals with same-sex sexuality, Chris is completely inactive. She states that it is easier that way. Although she is comfortable with herself and her life, she does not know what she fully believes in regards to religion. She wants to believe that she and her relationships will be considered equal in the judgment of God, but does not think about it too much otherwise it causes severe anxiety.

At follow-up, Chris met Nancy online and their relationship developed to the point of being inseparable. She and Nancy exchanged rings and want to spend the rest of their lives together. Nancy had not grown up in the LDS religion and never had a problem accepting herself, which has helped Chris to accept herself as well. They plan to move in together. Chris states, "My family has been as accepting as they can toward her, but yes, there is tension....Probably always will be."

## Irene

Irene is a 42 year-old Caucasian woman who identifies as lesbian and no longer considers herself Mormon, although she feels “in limbo” between being an ex-Mormon. Irene, born and raised LDS, reports being from “staunch pioneer stock.” She does not know a member of her family who is not LDS. The Church is core to her family’s identity. She states that the Church was everything for her family and she lived a very sheltered life. Her father worked for the Church and her mother stayed at home with the children. Her family spent the first 10 years of her life in the South and then her family lived for several years in Australia because her father served as a mission leader for the Church. After the family returned from this mission, they moved to the west coast. Irene served an individual mission in the Church when she came of age. She graduated from college and believed that she would follow the LDS script for the rest of her life.

The next step is going to be I’m going to get married in the Temple, I’m going to have 50 kids, they’re going to be really cute and you know the whole thing. But I guess for me I assume I was in denial really for a long time because I dated men, but not seriously. It was just kind of a I don’t know buddy of all, you know, it seemed like. Close relationships with women, just my friends. I just had a tight emotional bond with them. I never, I never felt like it was sexual or anything like that but it was certainly a strong bond and it was multiple women over the course of the years.

While Irene did want children, she never felt sad about not having a husband.

Irene moved to Utah where she worked for the Church when California voted on Prop 8 (a proposition that created a state amendment declaring marriage to be between one man and one woman). The Mormon Church’s contribution the political debates caused her to question her religion in ways that she had never done before in her 39 years.

Honestly I think that Prop 8 was a catalyst of sorts for me because it helped me to look at the Church differently and realize that EW I don’t like that, that’s disgusting, and why, how could I not like it, it’s the truth. You know. And



certainly everything that I have ever thought or thought that I knew was in question. Maybe it's like, like in the Church when you say well Joseph Smith was a prophet and the Book of Mormon has to be true and such and such. Well if prop 8 can really pull that out of the Church, what else is back there? And it made me question things in a way that I had never questioned and I realized, I guess, really the Church doesn't give an opportunity to question.

While Prop 8 caused her to challenge her beliefs in the Mormon Church, she believes that accepting her sexual orientation and leaving the Church are two different things. She does admit to having “felt same-sex attraction feelings certainly more readily since that time.” She felt that working for the Church delayed her coming out a little because her work position required that she hold a temple recommend. She began attending events in the LGBT community (although not fully participating in some due to fear of being outed), reading everything that she could about sexuality, and became fascinated in other people’s stories of same-sex sexuality. She recognized that the feelings that she had were more than merely wanting to have an emotional relationship with other women.

I didn't want to, I didn't want to believe it so I think I probably delayed that recognition because I really want it just to be a loneliness issue or I just need to be around people that understand me and accept me. I didn't want it to be I guess, I didn't want it to be sexual. I didn't want it to be definitely against what I thought I believed.

Irene began living a double life, putting on her garments and nylons to go to work during the day and then taking them off at home to engage in social activities in the LGBT community. She dated women. She participated in church less often, but went enough to maintain her temple recommend. She lied to her family and pretended to be as active in the Church as she always had been. She experienced guilt for leading two lives, but not for engaging in sexual activity.

Once she left Church employment, she felt liberated to come out. She has only come to accept her sexuality in the past year. She states that she does not want to be lesbian, but she is what she is and has finally accepted this logically. She started off by telling a couple of friends and has not received an adverse reaction. Despite thinking that she would hold this secret from her family to her grave, Irene came out to one of her sisters. Her sister pleaded with her to tell their parents because she could not handle the secret on her own. Since Irene's parents were serving a mission elsewhere in the United States, she sent them a letter. In it she said:

I haven't been active in the church in the last few years...I have concerns about the Church and I don't want to be your service project and I have come to the realization that I am gay and I am happy...I'm not sad. I don't want to disappoint you. I don't want you to treat me differently. I don't want you to cut the nieces and nephews off from me. I don't want to have any pity. I'm happy you know. I've been working with a therapist for years (and that shocked them, they didn't know any of this). Because I really, I think emotionally I have not been part of the family for a long, long time.

Irene wanted her family to love her unconditionally, but felt that everything had a condition. Her family believed that if one went to church that meant they were righteous and if one did not go to church that meant they were a bad person. Her family has been more accepting of her coming out as gay, than as not believing in the Mormon doctrine. "I think I anticipated that they would be upset about me leaving the Church, but I didn't know that they would trivialize the same-sex attractions, sexuality side, which they have." She describes their reaction to her coming out in two phases. Phase 1 is to reiterate how much they love her and feel saddened by the pain that she has experienced. Phase 2 is to question her lack of faith in a church she should know is true. Irene has had difficulty challenging her beliefs.

I think I believed it wholeheartedly. I think I thought I believed it. And now it's, you know, I think I've gone cold turkey a little bit. You know I threw the baby out with the bathwater a little, but I just said phsss none of it. And I think I have to go back a little bit and really find out what I believe and whether it's related to the Church or it's spirituality or it's a God because I still believe in God and I want to believe in certainly the good parts. I just don't know, I don't know. I'm too scared to go there I think. I don't want to get into the thick of it because it's so familiar still after 40 years of being in it. It's familiar enough that I can see it being easy to get sucked up again into the things that were familiar enough that, you know, I could do it in my sleep...and even going to church now when I go for a family thing or something, it feels fine. I mean it's normal. So I think I need to take time and dissect it and really be like what exactly is it that I believe, not what do they want me to believe, not, and I can't get the core level yet.

Her family has gathered together once since she sent her coming out letter. This visit felt like a normal family get-together because no one talked about her sexuality.

Irene felt that the lack of discussion was both a blessing because the family did not feel any contention and also a curse because she does not feel there has been closure.

Irene is continuing on her journey, with the help of counseling, by accepting herself and her worth.

I'm not a typical. I haven't had 20 years of experience in this to give you, but all I got is what I got...Sometimes I think what if I had known when I was 17, would it have benefited me? I would like to think that it would because you know I would have more experience and have more relationships. I'd have a better understanding of myself. I would have questioned the Church earlier. But then I think, you know the last 20 years have been great. I've had some fantastic experiences and I don't know how that would have changed who I am...sometimes I feel...jealous of so-and-so who's known since she was 12. That would be awesome. But I can't change it, so I think I'm just coming to the place where I'm trying to accept it and not feel disadvantaged but also, yeah that kind of sucks. I got a little catching up to do, but...how do I do for me?

### Barbarella

Barbarella is a 33-year-old single White female who identifies as lesbian. At this point in time, she leans towards atheist. She grew up in Arizona and did not experience

the same cultural pressures from a dominant Mormon culture, as she would have in Utah. Barbarella was the only Mormon in her school. Although her parents actively participated in the religion, several members of her extended family were not Mormon and she remembers smoking and drinking occurring at family BBQs.

Barbarella states that she went back and forth in her activity in the Church. In high school, she experimented with drugs. She did not experiment with sex like the rest of her peer group. By college she had very limited experiences with boys and the experience that she did have were more just so that she could have that experience. She felt confused because some of these men seemed to really like her and she did not feel anything for them. Describing an her sexual experience with one man she dated:

We never had sex. We had oral sex. And it wasn't fun, it wasn't enjoyable...I just sort of started feeling like those women who talk about how sex isn't any fun and...is something just to be endured. And I knew that wasn't right. I knew that's not how it should be, that's not how it should feel. And so after him I sort of just stopped because I didn't want to feel that way anymore.

Barbarella decided to study abroad. She looked into different programs and found that BYU had the best program for her. She lied to her bishop in an interview to determine adherence to lifestyle and morality codes in order to obtain the recommendation which she needed for this program.

So I got in and I went and for better or for worse it steered me towards the Mormon side. For the first time in my life I was surrounded by Mormons and I had a really good experience. In fact I met a girl and we became very, very, very close. Someone questioned what our relationship was. And at the time you know it was very innocent and pure and sort of bosom buddy type of thing.

Her experience in the program and her relationship with this friend rejuvenated her desire to practice the religion. Barbarella felt as though she needed to compensate for her past and decided to go on a mission. She found her mission difficult because of the

mental health issues of her companions. She also struggled teaching about Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon Church, because she did not fully believe in his story.

After her mission, she returned to Arizona to finish her undergraduate studies. She became extremely depressed during this time due to difficulty reconciling her issues with the Church.

I think that's where the depression really came in...I wasn't able to reconcile it and I was at that stage in my life where I should have been experimenting I think just from you know normal development, I guess normal we can put in quotations marks, but just normal development is just exploring my own sexuality. And I wasn't doing that at all and it just felt really suppressed and confusing and like nobody would ever love me and I was unwanted and undesirable and why didn't Mormon guys like me. Why didn't they?

She spent long periods of time in bed and coped by eating. She experienced vague suicidal ideation and began taking antidepressants. She continued to attend church. Once she graduated, she moved to California. She stopped attending church and began smoking marijuana again. She moved out the negative environment in which she found herself surrounded and became active in her new ward, believing that by not living according to the standards of the gospel had produced her unhappiness. Barbarella felt comfortable in the atmosphere of this liberal ward where some members identified as openly gay. She actively participated in the Church and even served as a temple worker.

Barbarella decided to move to Utah in order to begin graduate school. By this time, Barbarella felt less interested in participating in the Church because she had not found the happiness she sought.

I think I just felt like so tired of feeling like I had wasted time focusing on trying to be the best that I could be and obtaining perfection and being super spiritual and doing everything right and serving in the Church, paying my tithing, and you know being 28 years old and single in the Church which sucks because I was in Utah at that time. So that sucks even more.

In her new graduate program, Barbarella experienced attractions towards a female classmate, Kim. Barbarella felt compelled to be near Kim whenever she could and would steal glances during class. Struggling with these feelings, she traveled to Arizona to see her sister get married in the Mormon Temple there.

And I the whole time I was on the trip and I didn't tell, I haven't told anybody anything, nothing. And the whole time I was on the trip I kept thinking oh I'm fine, like I can totally walk...away from this. And I don't have to act on this and I'm totally good and I don't even need to. And I felt really, really strong kind of and then the first time I saw her when I came back I was like yeah I got this, I'm okay. And then I think that it was the second time and it was done. It was done. I was like what am I thinking like I can't do this. And I remember walking out to the parking lot with her and talking and just feeling so, I liked that girl, like nothing I had ever felt before. And she got into her car and I kept walking to my car and I remember at that moment, it was at night and...it was getting cold and praying to God saying "don't take this away from me." And that was pretty much, I swear to God pretty much the last prayer I have ever uttered. It just changed and I was done. I was done asking him to take it away. It was the last thing I wanted. And then from there I mean it was totally almost like out of my control it felt like...I had to just see it through.

Barbarella did not feel anything wrong with the way she felt about Kim. Her and Kim began a romantic relationship, which quickly became sexual. Barbarella felt no guilt with her first sexual experience with Kim.

I met her and I was like I'm done with the Church because there's nothing wrong with how I feel about her. And I knew that. I sort of thought that the first time that I did anything sexually with a woman that I would have some sort of guilt or something and that wasn't the case at all. It felt absolutely right. Absolutely right. And that just furthered all of my feelings or fueled all of my feelings that the Church was absolutely wrong. And if the Church was wrong about love, then the Church was wrong about everything. You know the Church raised me to be a black-and-white thinker and I continue to be, it's something I struggle with and continue to work on, but it is definitely a part of who I am and that's sort of where I'm at still with the Church. It's all or nothing. And like I said they taught me that and now they're at nothing.

Barbarella found some beliefs easy to disregard, like the story of Joseph Smith. But found other beliefs more difficult to give up. “The image of God, the Mormon God, I could not get out of my head. I still cannot get out of my head.”

Her relationship and the intensity of her feelings for Kim forced her to come out to others immediately because “I knew that it was big and it felt bigger than me, and it was bigger than me because it was my sexuality coming out.” Barbarella came out to her mother within a month of the relationship beginning. Her mother responded that she was happy that Barbarella was able to experience love. Her father had a less ideal reaction. He told her that her being gay was as painful as his experience of being raped repeatedly as a young boy. This hurt Barbarella in a way that will always remain with her, despite having a better relationship with him now than she ever did in the past. Barbarella told him that they could not have a relationship if he felt this way. A man of few words, he responded “Ok” and they have not discussed it since.

Barbarella’s first experience with love proved to her that she was not unlovable. Barbarella describes the relationship as great and “awful, mostly awful.” Kim repeatedly cheated on Barbarella and would not define the relationship. The relationship became emotionally abusive. They broke up and reunited multiple times. Eventually, Barbarella ended the tumultuous relationship. She moved back to California in order to get the hell out and started hiding.

It's very easy to not think about being Mormon when you're not in Utah and you're not around it at all. Because nobody's Mormon where I was. So that was really easy for me and I also needed to distance myself from her and what it had become. It had become really yucky and I just needed like actual physical distance.

She tried dating men again to see if her attractions toward Kim were an anomaly and not her orientation. After having to fantasize about a woman in order to enjoy kissing a man, she gave herself permission to just be gay. Barbarella engaged in a brief sexual liaison with a woman in an attempt to move on from her ex-girlfriend.

Although she had stopped attending the Church, she had not totally put the religion behind her. In 2009, Barbarella visited a former missionary companion. She attended church with her friend during their visit.

I just had such a strong reaction to these men. I thought God I hate Mormon men, like I hate them. I hate what they look like. I hate how they talk. I hate how they treat women. And it really upset me and I sort of thought that I would feel some sort of nostalgia or some sort of longing when I was in the actual church and there was sacrament meeting and I didn't. I felt, honestly I felt actual repulsion. I did not feel nostalgia at all...I couldn't, I couldn't do it. There was something that really kind of clicked in me that day where I was like I'm really like done. I'm really done.

Barbarella is confident and comfortable with her sexual identity and wants to be in a same-sex relationship. She is currently living in Utah and trying to build her community. Barbarella has struggled in her attempts to meet other lesbians and find friends, let alone potential dating partners. She again considers whether another move would help. Barbarella does feel like her spirituality is lacking because for so long she had enmeshed spirituality with religion. She states she needs more distance from her past religion in order to be ready to reconsider her spirituality and at this time finds comfort in not believing in any god.

#### Parker

Parker is a 46 year-old partnered lesbian raising a 13-year-old daughter. Parker holds no religious identity. She grew up in rural Utah in a family whose Mormon



ancestry stretches back to the settling pioneers. “My dad, and my dad’s dad, and my dad’s dad’s dad and his dad were all bishops of the same ward you know in the town that I grew up in...and my home was a very strict Mormon home.” Parker felt like the odd one out in her family because she did not conform to her mother’s gender expectations. She played sports throughout her schools years, despite her mother’s strong opposition. She states that her family did not talk about sexuality at all, let alone same-sex sexuality.

And always knew that I was you know crashing up against all of that. First became aware of my real sexual feelings for women at 12 at a, there was a person my age, I'm still very good friends with, who I had a huge crush on...not like this is my friend, but a real, a real crush and didn't really identify myself that way at that time with her because I didn't even, I didn't even know what it was, let alone have the ability to apply any sexual identity to myself. But I was certainly aware of my feelings for her and they were really strong. And anyway then I learned about people who are gay when I was about 14-ish or so and how horrible it was and how evil. And it was at that time I began to wonder are these the same, but would just push the thoughts away.

Parker remained active in the Church.

I'd describe myself as having a very strong testimony as Mormons would say and was on seminary counsel and really well-versed in the Scriptures. I'm sure that, I would describe myself the way I read a lot of people stories, the person who overcompensated religiously to fix those problems inside you know...just that fight to get rid of that part of me, that thing in me that was evil. You know and I saw it that way. I saw it as, it is hard to say that now because I don't feel that at all and so that feels sad to remember. But yeah that was just this person does a really terrible thing. You don't want anyone to know, you don't want anyone to find out that's you.

Parker’s feelings continued to be an internal struggle that occurred with the backdrop of the AIDS crisis and general social belief that the gay culture caused AIDS. Parker never let her thoughts come to a real crisis point for her, but she was always questioning. She denied this part of herself and uncomfortably dated boys.

At 21, Parker served a mission for the LDS Church. During her mission she felt attractions to some, but not all, of her companions. She painfully struggled with these

feelings. “I can't even let myself think it and feel it let alone express it to anyone or say it out loud or anything else.” She came back from her mission and dated a man that she “really loved.” However, their relationship ended in part because of a complete lack of physical connection. Parker found the loss of this relationship very painful and determined to be “very hyper-conscientious about how I responded physically to men.” Although Parker did not naturally feel inclined to engage in physical intimacy with men, she made herself engage during situationally appropriate times.

At the age of 28, Parker met a “good man” and within 5 months they married. In order to have a physical connection with him she had to will herself to be in that space and make a conscious effort so that her body would respond physically. She thought this unfair to him. Parker still had attractions to other women, but found these attractions easier to suppress due to energy being diverted to her marriage and a new job.

Parker’s husband became inactive in the Church, but Parker continued to attend church on her own. They moved into a new ward right after they married and for about 7-8 months no one said a thing to Parker. One Sunday, Parker’s husband came to church and that day church leaders called them to serve a position in the ward. This situation created a feeling of distrust for Parker as she realized that she “literally just disappeared” because she does not hold the priesthood. Despite the distrust, she remained active.

Just short of their 5-year anniversary they had a daughter, Tessa. They began having difficulties for reasons other than Parker’s sexuality. Her husband experienced some addictions prior to the marriage and they resurfaced. They divorced shy of 9 years of marriage.

Parker's parent told her that she just needed to get remarried. She tried, but after a failed date she realized that she did not want to put herself through that again and determined to stay single. However, a female friend from college came back into her life and their friendship developed into more. She describes falling in love:

Oh it is wonderful, and that was why it was so, I can't stop this. I can't pretend I don't feel this because it was, it was very strong and it was really beautiful and it wasn't, you know, where men were concerned I had to put myself in those spaces, I had to make myself consciously think. It just was. It was just a reality that I couldn't, I couldn't not have felt it if I had wanted to. I guess I could have, but it would have been incredibly destructive to stop it.

At first she fought the feelings.

Yeah I did. But they were just too natural to and the space was clearly there. There was no reason any longer. There were already cracks in the armor where the Church was concerned and it was just what am I doing, you know what am I doing to myself. What am I, am I just going to not feel for the rest of my life. You know or just feel and just let my soul be what my soul is.

Parker left the Church in conjunction with coming out. Since she had no intention to live according to the standards of the Church, she removed her name from the Church membership as it was "the honorable thing to do." Parker had many reasons to leave the Church besides her sexuality, but coming out did act as a catalyst and her decision to leave was reaffirmed many times throughout the process. She no longer believes in the doctrine of the LDS Church.

Parker came out to her ex-husband and family. Her ex-husband, while hurt, remained kind and would go out with Parker, her lover, and their daughter so that Tessa had "a stable and supportive environment across all the adult that were in her life." They maintained a positive relationship until he passed away 3 years ago.

Parker's family had difficulty with her choices. Her mother had always guessed about Parker's sexuality, but believed that Parker should remain in the Church and be

celibate. Parker told her mother that she planned on having a same-sex relationship. Her parents have tried to be supportive.

It is one thing about my mom, she's got her beliefs and her place and I've challenged that. And in all fairness to her even though there still is difficulty she really does try to understand. She doesn't just shut the door and say there's no understanding. She grows in steps and it's kind of interesting to watch that in her because you know if you had interviewed me 6 years ago I would have said she never would be open to it, but she makes her own progressive steps.

One of her brother's has not been supportive in any manner. In fact, he refused to attend a family holiday dinner because Parker and her partner would be there. He has cut off communication with the rest of her family and does not allow his children contact with their cousins because he believes that others in the family are too supportive of Parker.

Parker's first same-sex relationship did not last because her friend, also from a Mormon background and coming out herself for the first time, did not want to establish a partnership. They remained friends until Parker met and started dating Sara.

Parker and Sara formed a partnership and currently live together with Tessa in a small town in Utah with a high Mormon density. Parker and Sara are open about their relationship to their neighbors and Tessa's friends. Parker beams when she talks about her daughter. She introduced Tessa, who appears to be an open, kind, and accepting young woman.

### Holly

Holly is a 41-year-old partnered Caucasian woman. She identifies as lesbian and is currently not affiliated with any religious identity. Holly grew up in the South and her parents raised her in a strict Mormon household. The Mormon Church influenced every

aspect of their lives—from the books in the household to only being allowed to participate in Church sponsored activities.

In the South you are raised with the and in the culture of my family and extended family is that you are respectful of your elders and yes sir, no sir...And I would be punished if I didn't and you'd never call adults by their first name and just so there was this kind of this added layer, not just the Church layer, but an added cultural layer that's really kind of made it like you just did what you were told. You didn't question it. In fact if I ever questioned my parents, I'd be grounded and punished, spanked or whatever. So I think my belief in the Church was more out of you know my parents said this is what you need to do and I need to honor my parents.

Holly felt attractions toward other females, but did not understand what that meant.

I just knew that I had girl crushes from having a crush on my female teachers when I was in elementary school and but not really understanding what it was. I remember on my mission in the MTC I had this crush on the girl...and I didn't really understand or know what it was, but just knew I really liked this girl. But I didn't really understand it. I did date males growing up, of course, the traditional thing to do. But whenever a guy would get serious I would always run away.

Holly had gone to BYU because of pressure from her parents and then chose to serve a mission to take the pressure off of getting married. She did not enjoy proselytizing and spent a lot of her time in service-related work.

She returned to parents' house after her mission and finished her undergraduate degree at a Southern university. During this time, she went on missionary splits with Lori one of the sister missionaries, who served in her family's ward. They really liked each other and when Lori returned home they wrote each other for about a year and a half. Lori visited Holly in 1994 and they realized that they felt more than friendship for each other. With the encouragement of Holly's parents, Lori moved down South into Holly's parents home and they finished undergrad together.

They kept their burgeoning romantic relationship a secret from Holly's parents. They would steal kisses in secret and then publically date men. After a year, they moved into their own apartment together and a full sexual relationship developed.

We had this relationship and we were so wracked with guilt about it and because we would do that and then we were in the same ward as my parents and if we weren't at church they would know and so we had to go to church right after having carnal relations the night before or whatever. It was just really awful.

They moved to another state to start their graduate studies. They vacillated back and forth between having sex and "being good." Neither dated men during this time. They moved again after graduation. Wince they had not engaged in sexual relations for a period of time, Lori wanted to confess their relationship to the bishop in order to obtain full repentance. Holly agreed to this for Lori's sake. Part of the repentance process required them to date men. Dating produced feelings of jealousy in both of them, but they followed this counsel. They continued to live together.

We loved each other. So we didn't want to separate but we wanted to, we felt like we needed to repent...It was just this whole tumultuous ambivalent how do you make sense of something that's been part of you all your life and how do you reconcile this? All my life I've been taught to believe this, but I love her and she loves me. What do we do with this? We didn't really have anybody in our corner or anybody to talk to or you know everybody in our circle, in our support system were against us being together so there was no one we could talk to.

Holly started researching sexuality and began to open herself to the LGBT community; she also began watching episodes of the L Word. She wanted to openly identify as a sexual minority, but Lori did not feel ready to give up her faith because of what the religion meant to her. Holly broke and told Lori that she could not do this anymore. Holly moved out and Lori moved back to her parents' house in the Northwest.

Holly investigated the LGBT community further. All her co-workers at this time happened to identify as sexual minorities and she found herself in a safe space to try on a

lesbian identity. Rebellious against her past, she began drinking a lot and had a casual sexual encounter with another woman. Holly describes this as a dark period in her life.

Heartbroken, Holly began coming out in bits and pieces to her parents because they needed support. Her family did not support her and attempted to call her to repentance.

Holly experienced a series of unfortunate events, which included breaking her foot.

While still in the hospital, her parents told her that God was punishing her for her choices.

It was almost like my parents, who were very overprotective and very stifling, they were very connected with the Church and good or bad the Church represented this stifling parent to me. And I was finally separating myself from my parents and saying no I don't agree with you. And so with the Church I was like if a God would punish me like that, that's not the kind of God that I want to worship or that I want to believe in. And I remember thinking that when my dad was sitting there lecturing me and I remember thinking that is your idea of God that's coming from you, that's not what I believe. And that was probably the first time that I was like I don't believe in that. I believe differently than you and I don't believe in everything that the Church says.

Holly and Lori had kept in contact. Holly visited Lori. They went on a date and talked. They realized that they still loved each other and wanted to be together. Lori now felt ready to be in a relationship with Holly openly. Holly moved to be with Lori.

As soon as I got here she was out and open too just like me. And I think it helped being in [a progressive area] doing that to be perfectly honest. I don't know if we had moved to Utah or if we had moved to another place in the South if it would have been as easy for Lori. Because [our workplace] was so supportive. People in [this area] are so supportive. It was just like we weren't demonized or looked down upon or the thought that we were these horrible people like we had experienced up to that point.

After a year of being openly together and a year of Holly's parents sending missionaries to their door, they wrote individual letters to the Church requesting their names be removed from the membership roles in order to escape the barrage of people trying to reactivate them and to avoid the possibility of a church disciplinary counsel to

excommunicate them because of their sexual relationship. Holly experienced a release when she mailed her letter.

But when we did that I was so much (sigh of relief) it was like this huge relief. It was just this (sigh) I can finally be me. And I just kind of shed the guilt and shed all of that baggage that came from feeling bad about yourself for something that to me was just so innocent and pure you know it wasn't anything evil or anything about the way I felt about Lori and our relationship. In fact, it has been the source of so many good things and such happiness in my life so. So it's been good ever since.

They now hold a registered domestic partnership. Lori has not come out to her parents who live in the same city, but they know that Lori and Holly share a bedroom and they treat Holly as family. Holly's parents did not speak to her for about a year after she chose to live openly in her relationship. This past year they visited her family in the South for a Christmas vacation for the first time as a couple. The experience provided her family with an example of a same-sex relationship that did not match the stereotypes they held about same-sex sexuality. Holly's mother recently visited their home.

And it was really, really weird, my mom said twice while she was [visiting our home] like, 'do you think you and Lori will adopt?' And it just about floored me. And she said, 'you would make good parents.' So it was just really like shocking to hear that. And I think she's, although she is not accepting, I think she's thinking it's inevitable, I can't fight it. But it was just really strange to hear that.

### Farah

Farah is a 44-year-old partnered female. She describes herself as "Whiteish." She identifies as White, but knows that she probably has Latino roots. She has identified as lesbian for the past 11 years. She describes herself as spiritual, but not religious. Farah grew up in an active Mormon family in Southern California. Farah is able to recognize in hindsight the attractions she always felt for girls.



Didn't ever have a way to identify that what I was feeling was something other than friendship for my girl friends. So when I would have what I can now identify as romantic feelings for girls growing up, I thought they were just what I feel with the best friend in the world that you could ever have. And I didn't have those feelings towards boys so I didn't have a way to say oh wait no that's what romantic feels like. So I just thought well this is my soul mate kind of thing.

Farah had a boyfriend from the age of 17-21, but felt no desire to engage in sexual activity with him. They broke up when she left served a mission for the LDS Church. On her mission she met Lily. Lily had returned from BYU and was preparing to serve a mission herself. In her preparation Lily accompanied the Farah during her missionary work and participated in many of the missionary activities.

We just connected like you know immediate I know you. And didn't have again any kind of name to give it. So within the LDS context it was we must be daughters of the same heavenly mother, you know things like that. Just we were that close, so close, soul mates.

Farah returned home from her mission early because of physical illness. For one month she remained set apart as a missionary and needed to have a companion 24 hours a day. Lily's bishop had rejected her application to serve a mission because of her own physical issues. Given the opportunity, Lily came to stay with Farah in her home until Farah was released from her mission calling.

We were just I mean inseparable and that was in our minds the best thing in the world that ever could have happened. At that point we got a little physical with each other. But I think while she was feeling like this is what I have been wanting, I was feeling a huge amount of guilt and denial and just not even really paying attention to what that really meant.

Since Farah no longer needed a companion, Lily planned to return home. On her drive back to her home, she visited an aunt in another state and chose to live there rather than return to her parents' house. Once she became established in a job and her own apartment, Farah moved to in with her. Their relationship quickly became sexual.

We attended our branch every Sunday. Other than that we were just living a life of we're together. Didn't tell anybody else about it because again we didn't have any idea that there was such a real thing as gay relationships or that you could live a happy life that way. But the guilt started to really eat me up...you are brought up with a lot of this is how you are supposed to do things and if you don't, you're really going to regret it. So you live that regret in the moment...I finally said to her, I need to go back to BYU and get my life back in order. And she said, "Oh I do too." She told me years later that she was just afraid of losing me. At that point she probably would have been content saying goodbye to all of that, I just want to be with you...So the way she could be with me was just say, I'm not saying goodbye to all of that. So we both came back to BYU and continued for years with this cycle of giving in to that love and attraction to one another and then my just being eaten up with guilt over it and backing away again.

In 1996, Lily lost a job and this triggered her to feel the need to confess their sexual relationship. They went to the bishop. At this time they owned a home together, a business together, and dogs together.

We went to the bishop who was actually phenomenal. I mean there are a million things he could've said that would have torn us to pieces and he didn't. He said, "Clearly you love each other and you want what's best for each other and I'm not going to say that you can't live together or you know get on with your lives. But now I'm kind of in on it so I'm going to be checking in on you and you just need to get things on track." Bless him. So he also went to bat with the stake president on our behalf, we didn't have to go through any kind of a Council or anything that was the ultimate horror that we could think of. And just every Sunday shake our hands and just kind of look us in the eye and make sure that things were going the way we all thought it should be within the context of the Church. That went on for 3 years. We said that we gave each other up for God... Basically we lived in a way that no one could ever question that we hadn't given everything the best chance we should have. No one could say well you didn't really give the gospel chance. You didn't really do things the way you were supposed to so you never knew how good it could feel. We did it by the book for 3 years. We were co-teachers in Relief Society and she taught Sunday school and I did you know music coordinator for the Ward and we were just in the heart of the faith. But that, that element of love was feeling denied to us.

A shift occurred when Farah met a new friend, Becca. Farah and Lily became fast friends with Becca and her roommate Paula. Little did they know that Becca and Paula were lovers. Becca had lost friends by coming out and did not want to lose her new friendship and so did not disclose their romantic relationship. One night Paula

disclosed the relationship. Lily experienced a watershed moment and for the first time in her life shared her and Farah's story. Lily stopped attending church and began to identify as bisexual. Farah remained active in the Church. Lily soon developed romantic feelings for a friend. However, before a relationship developed this woman encouraged Lily to consider her relationship with Farah because they had been together for 10 years at this time.

Lily came home to Farah "and said you know I love you more than anyone and I would rather be with you than anyone, but I can't live in limbo anymore." She gave Farah one month to figure out her feelings. Farah felt confident that she would remain active in the Church.

As the month passed, Farah experienced feelings of jealousy of Lily's feelings toward this other woman. In order to obtain peace, Farah went to the temple and made a deal with God.

I made a deal I felt he could keep and I could recognize. And that was, I never feel comfortable in the Temple, I'm going to go to the Temple, this is your house, just help me feel peace there. And I went and I felt worse than I had ever felt. I was so sick sitting there...I think I was literally having an anxiety attack or a panic attack and I just kept telling myself calm down when you get into the celestial room you will be able to sit and meditate and everything will be fine. Got in there and it was seriously as if a gigantic bus had just let off a load of people. There wasn't even a corner to go sit in or a table to crawl under or anything. And in that moment I felt like you just don't even care. And I ran down to the changing room, got changed, got into my car and screamed at God all the way...I just said I have been a faithful handmaiden...for 33 years and I'm so unimportant to you that you don't even give me peace when I say that's all I need. Fine, I'm going to go ahead and take this other path if I'm not important to you. At the time I still thought this isn't the right path, I'm still going to be struck by lightning, literally thought something horrible would physically happen to me. But I was so mad, I didn't care.

Farah went immediately to Lily. For the first time in 3 years, they again expressed their love for each other sexually. Farah had one moment in the beginning

where she felt that she could not move forward in their relationship because she worried that she could not give up her family, culture, and religion. They decided to take it one day at a time and have never looked back. Years later Lily would reflect on the religion that she once practiced so faithfully and wondered if she still even believed what she had once.

Farah's parents visited in the months after Farah and Lily had started to live together again as full romantic partners, although they did not inform their families of this. Farah's mother noticed that she no longer wore garments, a religious underclothing, and pulled Farah into an individual conversation about why. Farah came out to her mother. Her mother had suspected the relationship for years. She appeared calm and gave Farah a hug stating, "I love you. I'll always love you." Her mother left their house early the next morning before Farah awoke and had returned back to California.

Her mother would no longer talk to her. Her father tried to maintain their relationship, while still condemning her choice. Farah found new beliefs and reconnected herself spiritually to the universe. After many years of distance, her mother began to talk to her again. They reconciled before her mother died of a long-standing illness. As she sat in her mother's hospice room with her siblings and their spouse, Farah fell apart and Lily held her. "And they all saw that love." When they returned for the funeral two weeks later, her family treated Lily like part of the family for the first time.

Farah and Lily continued their life together. Lily reconnected with an old friend and with Farah's consent they opened up their relationship. Farah navigated the feelings that come with an open relationship and sharing one's partner. She experimented with polyamory herself. During this time she met Amber and they began a relationship with

Lily's consent. For a while, Farah and Lily and their other partners all lived together. Farah and Lily's communication deteriorated and after several years and eventually counseling they decided to end their relationship. Farah and Amber remained together and now live with each other in a monogamous relationship and together are raising Amber's child from a previous relationship.

### Ellen

Ellen is a 26-year-old Caucasian female who is married to another woman. She identifies as lesbian and no longer identifies with any religion. Ellen grew up in Northern Utah in an active Mormon family. Ellen states that her family made the coming out process a difficult experience.

My mom tried to remain somewhat understanding, but always with the belief that I was sinning and able to change and if not marry a man at least be celibate type of things. And then my dad...he's very traditional minded, most of my family is, and he was outright disgusted I think by, by my sexuality. And most of my family including aunts and cousins and things haven't really been all too accepting and I attribute that to the culture, to the Utah culture and the religious beliefs that they have, all of them being Mormon.

Ellen did not suspect that she might be gay in her youth. Although she experienced attractions toward other women, she assumed that when she grew up she would marry a man. She had never felt attractions towards males. She describes her town as:

Pretty small-minded you know so there's a lot of things that aren't really accepted there. They have their own kind of value system. And it's governed a lot by the Church. But I mean it's not just if you're gay you're not accepted, it's if you're not Mormon or if you're not married and have kids or if you, you know, all those suicidal no-nos. I think, I think I knew that it wasn't okay to be anything but Mormon.

She moved from her small town to go to college and became removed from these small town influences. Ellen attended church her freshman year in college. There she met another member, Mary. They became friends as they played basketball together in the ward house. As their friendship became closer, they would snuggle together and Ellen would stay overnight. Ellen thought it strange that they snuggled, but she knew of other women who also engaged in this behavior with close friends. Ellen began to realize that she had feelings for Mary. One morning they ended up kissing. Ellen “freaked out.” They agreed that they would not kiss again.

They spent the next couple of semesters trying not to be together, but continued to snuggle and kiss. It was a year before the relationship turned sexual.

We both were still going to church and eventually after maybe a couple of semesters there was always talk of we can't, we can't continue this, this is right, this isn't okay, God doesn't want this to happen and what not until finally I think we both just like accepted that it wasn't right by the Church's standards, but it felt right for us.

Ellen at first tried to remain active in the Church, but felt too guilty. She went to her bishop and asked to be released from her calling because she was dating a woman. By this time they were roommates. Her bishop counseled her to move out, but she would not. She wanted the relationship and stopped attending church. Ellen continued to feel conflict about the relationship even though not attending church. They broke up and got back together several times. Ellen went home during this time and came out to her mother.

And they knew [Mary] and they loved her and they thought she was great until I told them that she was my girlfriend. But I went home saying hey I don't want to be lesbian, I'm going to try and be straight and my mom, my mom was really upset about it and she cried and we didn't talk about it for a while. But they were, my family, my mom, I guess I should say because my dad didn't know, I just told her. She was willing to work with me because she wanted to me to be straight.

Ellen told her mother that she planned to be straight, but when she returned to school she continued to engage in a romantic relationship with Mary. Out of fear of again being rejected and ostracized by her family, she did not tell her mom that she and Mary got back together. Their relationship continued this back and forth of together, not together. One time when Ellen decided that they could not continue, she tried to date men. “So I started hanging out with this guy and trying, I don't know why I thought it would work to just go date person and all the sudden I would be straight.” She tried dating two different men and both times she felt wrong and gross trying to engage in a romantic relationship with them. She went back to Mary.

I still believed in the Church in its teachings, but I knew that it's not what I wanted. I didn't want to marry a boy and go to the Temple and things like that. So I knew that I couldn't have what the Church said that I was supposed to have. And so I still believed in it, but I have a really perfectionistic personality and so to me it was like kind of all or nothing. Either I'm going to do everything right and go to church or I'm going to love this person, this woman and not go to church.

Ellen went abroad in 2007. While away, her mother disclosed her sexual orientation to her brother. Ellen received a letter from her brother saying that she was throwing away her eternal salvation, she was destroying the family unit, and she could never be allowed to see her nephew again. This devastated Ellen and she felt willing to do whatever it took to be with her family. When she returned to the U.S., she immediately broke up with Mary and moved out of the apartment they shared. She visited her family a couple of times after this and became increasingly upset that her family's love was conditional. She felt unwelcome in their homes and in their hearts unless she lived according to their beliefs.

Eventually Ellen decided that she did want to be with Mary. “I didn't ever say I was gay. Like in my mind I wasn't gay, I just loved this person.” She moved into the

house Mary had bought when they were broken up. Both she and Mary were lying to family and friends, pretending not to be together. Ellen wanted to be out in her life, which Mary did want. When they met another lesbian couple, Ellen felt intrigued by one of the women's sexual pursuit of her. She and Ellen engaged in a brief affair. Ellen and Mary broke up. A few months later, they reunited and attempted couples counseling.

Ellen was honest with her mother about the relationship and her mother asked her to talk to someone at Evergreen, an LDS affiliated organization dedicated to helping "people who want to diminish same-sex attractions and overcome homosexual behavior." Ellen still played with the idea that the Church might be true. She agreed to speak with a woman from Evergreen. During their conversation, this woman shared her experience of giving up a same-sex relationship to a woman she loved and her marriage to her husband.

I was just really just shocked by how the Church had brainwashed this woman to believe that even though she didn't really love her husband and that she wasn't attracted to him that she should deny herself the woman and the life that she wanted most in the world and even though I had those own feelings about myself and my experience I felt, I mean just seeing someone else doing opposite of what I was doing, I think just was enough for me. It was enough for me to say okay no loving God would do this to somebody. No loving God would do this. And so I just quit. Quit even thinking that the Church was something for me. And knowing that it would never be a place that I would be able to be myself.

Ellen and Mary planned to move to the Northwest together. Before this occurred, Mary broke up with Ellen after finding a new girlfriend. At this point, Ellen wanted to be out publically. She joined the gay club on campus and took a leadership position within this group. While accepting herself, her family continued to reject her sexual orientation. Her parents told her that while they welcomed her in their house, her girlfriends would not be welcomed. Her brother told her she could not see her nephew.



Ellen felt heartbroken when Mary left her. She began drinking and spiraled downward because she had no social supports she could talk to about her situation. During this period of self-sabotage, she met a woman who later became her wife. Through a slow process that involved a great deal of dating, consideration, self-reflection, and becoming a better person their relationship evolved.

Ellen and her wife dated for a year, became engaged, and after another year married each other in a nonlegally binding ceremony in California. Ellen's family did not attend. They had a reception back in Utah, which Ellen's brother did attend. He told her that he had been doing a lot of thinking and believed that her love for her wife compared to his love for his wife. Their relationship remained strained because he told that she is not the type of person (aka Republican) with whom he would want to have a relationship regardless of her sexual orientation. At follow-up, Ellen and her brother had started to repair their relationship and the relationship she and her wife have with his family.

At first Ellen visited home without her wife, but then refused to come alone. Eventually her mother invited her wife to visit the family home also as long as the two did not hold hands. They agreed to this for a period of time. Ellen could not abide by her family's treatment of her wife and became more vocal about this as they are planning to have children.

I told my mother that I would like for her and my dad to be grandparents to our children and that if they would not be capable of treating them like their grandchildren, that I would not allow my children to be treated in such a way. So, I explained that we love them and want them in our family's life, but they would have to make an active effort to show their love of our children (like they would show their love of my brother's children) or we will need to cut family ties because I will never allow them to treat my children the same way they have treated my wife and me.

Ellen no longer holds any religious beliefs. At first she could not believe she could see religion outside of a Mormon theology.

I attributed God to a very negative belief, or a negative feeling and that feeling was very much tied to and associated with the way I felt about my family and how they treated me. And so Mormonism and God were so connected and so were the way my family was treating me that I could not think about a belief or God as being true... So I did kind of go through that progression of thought, but eventually I just thought you know there just isn't a God. There is no purpose or plan that's governing our lives. And there is no spiritual higher order or anything like that and I was very much relieved and comforted and I felt free and happy to not believe in anything. I don't know I guess it just felt most comforting and natural just to believe that we're all human and that we all have goodness and that's it. There's nothing else that is telling us how to live or that we should be this way or that way except for our innate desire to be good.

### Kathryn

Kathryn is a 45-year-old White, partnered female who identifies as lesbian. She considers herself spiritual, but not affiliated with any religion. Kathryn grew up in a “very, very conservative community.” She only knew other LDS people. By the age of 11 or 12, Kathryn noticed her difference from female peers who were always chasing boys.

I sensed I was different, they sensed I was different. But I never would even allow myself to think it. It's like the thought would come you might be...No. You're not cause that's not a real thing because the Church teaches me gay's not real thing. I'm just being tempted.

Kathryn did not date at all in high school. In order to fit in, she pretended, even to herself, to have crushes on boys. She tried to follow the crowd because she felt confused and depressed. The depression produced suicidal thoughts, even though she could not really identify what caused her to feel this way. She made a suicide plan and waited for her parents and five siblings to be out of the house. She knew where her father kept the

key to his gun cabinet and took out the handgun. She held the gun in one hand and the bullets in the other. She heard someone come home. Kathryn put the gun back and left the house.

I felt alone and that I felt different. Not accepted...it was that recognition that there was something different about me and I knew I wasn't the same as all these people I was spending time with. And I couldn't, I couldn't be what they wanted me to be. So it's just that sense of I'm never going to be at home sewing and cooking and taking care of my husband. And I just knew it. And I knew that that was a failure on my part. So that was, that was really the big thing that I've felt like that I couldn't be who I was supposed to be because the Church told me who I was supposed to be.

Her family regularly took part in church activities. Kathryn continued this pattern of activity in her college years. She attended a single's ward. Her social and religious lives merged. Kathryn believed. She believed because her family and community engrained her to believe. "I didn't really have my own thoughts. I had the Church's thoughts. I didn't really ever take time to separate them and so I believed whatever they told me."

Kathryn tried to date. Around the age of 22, she dated a man who others quickly believed that she might marry. She did not feel any attraction to him and their relationship did not last. At the age of 26, Kathryn met Ann, who recently began investigating the Church. Ann joined the ward. Kathryn attended Ann's baptism.

We just became fast friends. Just really, really, really good friends and then really, really, really, really, really good friends. And then you just kept getting closer and closer and in my mind it was just a really, really, really, good friend. I loved her as a friend. She was a comfort as a friend. And she used to say things to me like, "Well if you ever really knew the truth about me you wouldn't want to be hanging out with me."

Two to 3 years into their friendship, Ann attempted to kiss Kathryn. This terrified Kathryn. She said she could not, but they continued to be friends. One night as Ann

gave Kathryn a shoulder rub, she moved her hands down Kathryn's front. Kathryn stopped her, but needed to digest the feeling because she had not wanted Ann to stop.

So over the next 2 weeks was this frenzy of her coming towards me and me trying to figure out what I wanted and it eventually culminating in the two of us getting together and it was like a light switch. Like immediately (snaps) 'oh, I'm gay.' It was just like of course I'm gay. Because just immediately it was like okay I was never attracted to any of these guys the way I am attracted to her.

After their first sexual encounter, Kathryn burst into tears. She:

Cried and cried and cried and cried because it was like in one swoop everything that I had been trying to be, I knew was gone and I just felt this release of you know not just probably a relief, but also this sense of shame and sense of I wasted my life.

Kathryn and Ann began a secret sexual relationship. For 2 years, they privately loved each other. Kathryn describes the relationship as:

Two weeks of bliss and two years of hell because...there was intermittent bliss, but the majority of it was just horrible....And then me dealing with: I want this. I don't want this. I want this. I don't want this. So I'm pushing back and forth so it was, there was a lot of drama, lots of fighting, lots of kissing and making out and honestly you know a pretty fun time at times because we were sneaking around, trying to figure out a time to meet to have sex...so that was very fun. So there's those moments that are just so titillating and ooo that was so great.

Within the first few months of beginning the relationship, Kathryn went to her bishop and asked to be released from her calling as a teacher in their ward. He pressed her to find out why. She confessed that she had begun a sexual relationship with another woman. He became speechless and eventually told Kathryn, who had been endowed, that she needed to take a month to pray about this and search it out in her heart because she knew it was wrong. She agreed, but did not believe that a month would change her orientation. During that month, her bishop would not speak to her, shake her hand, and avoided her like the plague. After a month, he called her into his office and simply said,

“I’m so glad this is behind us.” This experience created doubt that this man could be her spiritual leader and she stopped attending church.

Actually that wasn't the first thing that made me start questioning the LDS Church, but it was yet another one...my questioning of the Church actually started long before my realization that I was gay, so in a way the two are two separate items. They certainly go hand in hand, but they are two separate items. So not all my problems with the LDS Church is about the fact that I'm gay. It certainly makes it so I will never go back, but I have issues with more than just that.

Kathryn views the incident with her bishop as traumatic.

There is just no way I would go back, but there was such a loss of community that I mean, that's I think what started me down the road to where I did actually have my suicide attempt because I was just, I felt so isolated. You know as things with me and [Ann] kind of disintegrated and I lost that relationship and that was the only person who knew I was gay. And so even though I had people in my life, none of them really knew me. They recognized that you don't seem to be going to church, but that didn't, that was the only thing they saw. So it was, it was a horrible loss.

The relationship with Ann ended when Kathryn gave Ann an ultimatum to choose their relationship or the emotional relationship Ann had with her roommate. Kathryn thought that Ann would choose her. Instead Ann completely disappeared and Kathryn never saw her again. Kathryn could not turn to family or friend's to deal with her heartbreak.

Kathryn entered into a period of denial. She told herself that she was not gay and that Ann had lead her down a path that she had not wanted to go. Kathryn began drinking and actively sought out male sexual partners. Although seeking male companionship, she no longer pursued the return missionary Mormon ideal.

Drinking heavily, she eventually decided that she needed to seek help. She began counseling and worked on her negative self-view. Kathryn began the healing process of therapy and peeled off the layers of imposed belief in order to rebuild herself. She

worked on the emotions she carried from the death of her father at age 17. She discussed the two different lives that she lived simultaneously. Her therapist urged Kathryn to merge her two worlds. They made a plan that Kathryn would take a beer to a family camping trip and drink it in front of them. The experiment appeared to go over smoothly.

A few days after the trip, however, Kathryn received a letter from her mother.

I don't remember a lot of the details now because it was, it was hurtful. It was about I would say 6 pages of 'you are lost. You don't know what you're doing. You're, you've lost your way. You're never going to accomplish anything of meaning if you don't get married and have children. You are setting a bad example to your nieces and nephews. You've let the devil get into your heart.' Just a lot of you know really kind of downplaying what I had accomplished in my career that 'none of your' in fact even I'm pretty sure that's how the sentence went, 'nothing in your career matters if you don't get married and have children.' That's an accomplishment that doesn't matter. What really matters is that you are a nice Mormon lady with a husband and kids.

Kathryn took the letter to her therapist. That night she went out drinking with her friends and got so drunk that she blacked out. The next morning she drove home from her friend's house and on the way stopped by the liquor store for a couple of bottles.

But it was okay if mom is mad at me for this, imagine what she's going to do when she finds out I'm gay. I mean there's no hope. I'm going to lose my family. And I love my family, very close to my nieces and nephews, and it was the most hopeless feeling to just, okay I was just drinking a beer and she just lost her mind...and so I just drank and drank and drank and read the letter and read the letter and read the letter until I was just horribly drunk and got on the computer and typed my suicide note. Got in the bathtub with the razor and put it to my wrists. Then I couldn't do it. Put it to my wrist, couldn't do it...I remember throwing the razor at the wall and saying, "Oh you chicken shit! You can't even do this right."

The next morning she woke up in her own vomit. She called her therapist who hospitalized Kathryn. The hospital forced her to call one member of her family. She called her sister and said that the hospital had her on suicide watch and not to tell anyone else in the family. The hospital released her after a couple of weeks. Kathryn went home

and found another letter from her mother. After reading it once, she got into her car and drove to her sister's house. She came out to her sister. They then went to their other sister's house and Kathryn came out to her. They all went to their mother's house and Kathryn came out to her mother.

You can have me in your life or not but it's going to be honestly. I'm going to be who I am. You're not going to like it and I'm okay with that, but you're not going to talk about it. You're not going to send me letters. I'm not going to open another letter you send me.

Kathryn's mother was just happy to know what was going on and does not question Kathryn on it. Her mother even attended a PFLAG event with Kathryn. Her mother continues to be an active Church member even while being supportive of Kathryn's relationship. Her family has accepted her.

Kathryn began involving herself in the LGBT community in both social activities and dating. She joined a support group and met others who had similar experiences. Group helped her work through her internalized homophobia. Kathryn became more comfortable with herself. Eventually a friend introduced Kathryn to her current partner. Her partner fulfilled all of Kathryn's ideals of a perfect partner and Kathryn is very happy in their relationship.

### Judi

Judi is a 56-year-old Hispanic female who currently identifies as lesbian and Buddhist. Her "highly traditional Hispanic family" raised her on the east coast. Judi did not feel that she "fit in there at all." She converted from Catholicism to the Mormon Church with parental consent, but not approval, at the age of 15. Struggling with

adolescence, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts, the Mormon Church helped save her from self-destruction. Her conversion resulted because she:

Met this woman who cared so much and was such a great person and everything, and then she belonged to this religion that has so many nice people in it and were so accepting. I think it was a lot of that attractiveness of that, plus just the side benefit of it just really disturbed my parents that I was doing this.

Judi also believed.

I went for the whole thing. I believed everything. I figured if I wasn't going to then I really shouldn't be a member so I tried to follow everything and believe everything that they said.

Judi recognized her attractions towards other girls and had even engaged in some pseudo-sexual play with another female friend. "After I converted I knew I still had those feelings but I felt like I could develop feelings for men." Judi lived in an era that held a general societal taboo on same-sex sexuality. At 16, Judi went to BYU to start her undergraduate work. There she became involved in a sexual relationship with a woman.

That was somebody I met and really cared about and got a friendship with and then got sexually involved with. It was based in shame I think because clearly I knew I wasn't supposed to be doing that and yet I couldn't seem to stop doing it. I tried you know we both tried to stop and pray and all that kind of thing so there was a lot of shame around that.

Because of the condemnation that she heard in her Sunday's meetings, the shame she felt drove her to constantly confess to bishops and try to repent. "But that never really took." She knew that she would remain friends with this woman and they continued a tumultuous relationship.

We sort of had an illusion or a fantasy that we would somehow pursue men at the same time and yet then there was a tremendous amount of jealousy about that too. So it was really complicated because we would never, because we weren't defining ourselves oh we're a couple or oh we're... because that was wrong. So it was sort of like okay we were very good friends and we also have a sexual relationship, but we should be dating men. So than we would date men and we



would become tremendously jealous and there would be all kinds of crying and screaming and acting out.

Eventually the sexual relationship tapered off, but they remained close and committed. "I had to flee from that relationship, I felt like I was getting devoured alive." Judi moved to the Midwest to complete her doctoral degree. Although now at a secular school, she lived in a Mormon sponsored dorm. She became less active in Sunday participation, but attended institute (religious classes) on a minimal basis in order be eligible to continue to live in her dorm. A sexual relationship began with one of her female roommates. Another roommate reported the activities to their bishop who broke confidentiality with the apartment managers.

I think he felt really guilty and we had this big screaming fight. So he sort of got me to promise that if I would go back to church that he wouldn't do anything about it and that was the way of us all getting out of it. So I promised to do that, which I never did. But I got to stay there until I was able to graduate. So right after that, I said I'm done with this you know it was basically overnight. I went to my friend's apartment and I said just get me a beer, I'm done. So I was done.

Prior to the altercation with her bishop, Judi felt really, really ambivalent about not attending church because she is normally the kind of person who is either all the way in or all the way out and yet she did not do what the Church said.

I was also dating men and having kind of semi-sexual relationships with them and definitely with women and I was learning stuff and working with people in my graduate psychology program that made it increasingly clear that I was not going to be able to do both things at once which is that the stuff I was learning about people is not consistent with what Mormonism taught. So that I was going to have to make a choice at some point and so there was just this tremendous amount of guilt you know because I haven't made a clear choice about sort of having one foot in both worlds so to speak. And then after that happened [the incident with her bishop], I just went over to the other side just without any guilt at all. I just had a strong feeling that this is not right and I'm done with it.

Judi moved back to Utah for her postdoctoral residency and has lived in Utah since. She never returned to activity in the Mormon Church and currently identifies as a

Buddhist. Judi does not want to have a relationship with the Church. She tries to ignore it as much as possible. Even though she lives in Utah, since she did not grow up there it does not feel like home. There are some residual feelings of anger.

I'll probably never stop resenting the religion for, not so much for me personally what it did to me although I carried a lot of that around for a long time, but more about the political situation and how it oppresses people in general. I don't really feel a personal animosity towards it just more of a, an environmental pervasive of what the hell you know kind of a thing.

She openly identified as a lesbian soon after returning to Utah.

I was kind of trying to be underground and everything and one of my colleagues who later I got involved with had a patient who was on the unit who had I guess had seen me or known me and she said to my colleagues something like about me being really butch. And I thought well then screw it you know if that's how obvious it is then I'm done with it, so then I was just done with it. I really only had one work situation ever since when I felt like I needed to be closeted at all.

Judi found a partner and committed to long-term relationship with this woman.

During her partnership, she conceived a son with the assistance of artificial insemination.

The relationship ended and she is currently a single parent.

She reports being perfectly comfortable with her sexuality identity, regardless of her relationship status.

Well I'm still a lesbian. I haven't dated in a long time and I don't want to you know. I just feel like I'm so done with that you know. I know it sounds like and everybody's like no you're not, you will. Because my experiences in the lesbian-dating world since I broke up with my long-term relationship have really not been very good...and I think this is true that at least for the friends that I know, the older that you get as a lesbian or as a person not just of lesbian, I see this with heterosexuals, the less tolerant you are of anything. It's like I don't want anybody in my space. I don't want to live with anybody. The first signs of psychopathology, they're out of here. You know, I'm not going to put up with this. And when you're raising a teenager especially, there's no room for anything. So I can't tolerate any kind of anything. And it's hard also when you date with children because especially if they don't have children, because I don't think I have ever dated anybody except my long-term partner who had children, they always have an opinion about how you should be raising your kids even though they don't have any. And I, I'm so done with that.

## Lynn

Lynn is a 25-year-old Caucasian female who identifies as lesbian and is currently a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church. Raised in southeast Idaho, she knew nothing but the LDS Church and Mormon culture. Same-sex sexuality was simply considered unacceptable.

It was always framed as if you're gay that's your choice. People just weren't gay. And so I...grew up thinking that people who are gay chose to be gay. And so I was definitely not gay...I figured I was just living a bad life and that if I would live a good life those feelings would start to go away, and I would be normal like everyone else.

Lynn did not start to suspect her sexual orientation until junior high when her female friends began developing crushes on boys and she did not.

But I did start feeling attracted to girls and developing crushes on them and wanted to kiss girls and things. And started feeling very guilty about those feelings and so then I started looking for answers.

Her search for information led her to the book The Miracle of Forgiveness by Spencer W. Kimball (1969). After reading the section on homosexuality, she felt like the worst person in the world, even though she had not engaged in any sexual behavior. Because her community considered same-sex sexuality gross and disgusting, she did everything that she could in order not to be gay.

I tried to live everything that the Church taught and I started engaging...in a lot of self-mutilating behaviors as a form of punishment [to] try to get myself to be a better person. I would date guys and ask them on dates. And they were fun to hang out with but...I don't know what it feels like to feel romantically attracted to a guy.

You grew up learning punishment changes bad behavior and so I felt like having these attractions was a bad behavior and if I punish myself when I had them then that would hopefully change that behavior and I would become attracted to men. And so ... that was one of the reasons. Another reason for cutting was because I hated myself and so it...let out a lot of frustration that way. And I just felt better after doing it.

She graduated from BYU-Idaho and then went to BYU in Utah for a semester to take language classes.

I did reparative therapy down there because I had tried everything else that I could think of not to be gay. And one of the counselors or psychologists at BYU [said] ‘Yeah, reparative therapy will work if you’re willing to put forth the effort...It’s possible to change your sexual orientation.’ So then...I had to wear an elastic band on my wrist and anytime I felt attraction for women I’d snap myself with the elastic band. And then...I was supposed to spend an hour or two hours a day thinking of women as disgusting and...abusive people and think of men as... wonderful people and imagine how wonderful it would be to spend time with them...And at first I thought that the reparative therapy had worked because...I wasn’t feeling attracted to men. But I wasn’t feeling attracted to women either...I think overall I was just so depressed that I wasn’t really feeling any sexual feelings by the end of the semester.

Lynn then spent time overseas and again experienced attractions towards women.

She returned to the U.S. even more depressed.

I became suicidal, but committing suicide in the Mormon Church is also a sin and will condemn you to...the lowest kingdom. And so I decided the best way to solve that situation would be to go get a master’s degree in International Relations and then maybe I could get a job in Afghanistan or something and get blown up in an embassy there.

Lynn moved to the Northeast for her master’s degree. She sought a refill on her psychotropic medication, but in order to see the school’s psychiatrist she also had to be in counseling. At first Lynn felt reluctant to discuss sexual orientation with her therapist. Instead they focused on Lynn’s negative self-worth. Upon probing, Lynn realized that her self-worth stemmed from her conflict with her sexual orientation. She felt she owed it to herself to seek out and meet other sexual minorities. She had never known anyone who identified as LGB before and when she finally knew people who were comfortable with their sexual identity and happily committed in a same-sex relationship, her beliefs and stereotypes about what it meant to be LGB started to break apart.

She opened herself up to the idea of having a relationship with a woman and experimented with dating females. She continued to attend church. The young liberal members of the ward she attended accepted her as a sexual minority.

About 2 years ago, Lynn's parents and one of her sisters discovered she was gay. Her mother and sister hope it is a passing phase. Her father has largely come to accept the fact that she's gay. Her grandparents also know, but have not said much on the matter. No one else in the family knows.

Because her family is actively Mormon, Lynn tried to balance the two worlds and for a while believed that she might be able to be gay and Mormon. When Lynn moved to the Midwest to begin her doctoral degree, she could no longer maintain church participation because the Midwest ward held similar attitudes to wards in Utah. "So I just stopped going because I got tired listening to how gays are threatening the family and all this super conservative dialogue." Lynn decided to try a welcoming congregation and began attending the Unitarian Universalist Church. Here she found community and acceptance.

I really liked the sense of community there and liked the fact that there were opportunities to be really involved in a religious community because that was something that I liked in the Mormon Church growing up: that there was a strong sense of social community and there were a lot of things to be involved in. And so that was one thing that really appealed to me...[In regards to] specific doctrinal beliefs about the afterlife...I would probably term myself as agnostic because I really just don't know.

She decided not to return to the Mormon Church. She finds her spirituality is more challenging because she no longer has a set script about what to believe or how to worship. At the time of our first interview, Lynn had not told her parents of her current

religious identity. She feared telling them and found it almost as hard as coming out as gay.

Her fears appeared to be unfounded because at follow-up she reported that her parents have found at that she is not Mormon. Her father is perfectly fine with it. Lynn believes that her mother wishes she would go to the Mormon Church, but her mother says she is fine with Lynn choosing her own religion.

Lynn met a woman in a different state through an online dating site. They went on a weekend trip together after talking on the phone for several months. For the first time Lynn felt a physiological reaction that she never felt for men. Lynn had her first sexual experiences on a weekend fling. They decided not to continue a long-distance relationship and ended their romance. Lynn has dated a few women since and became involved in a serious relationship for about 7 months with another woman who also came from a Mormon background. They have since broken up and decided to just be friends. She is now casually dating other women and waiting to see if anything more serious develops.

Lynn no longer feels the intense guilt that once caused her to engage in self-harm.

I don't feel guilty about it at all now. I almost feel like I've hit kind of a teenage rebellious stage 10 years delayed...I came [to this University] to do sex research essentially...I'm gay. I'm going to be in a relationship with a woman one day. I'm going to do research on sex and this...I guess [is] just my way of relinquishing the control that the Mormon Church had over my life for such a long time. So if I want a cup of coffee in the morning, I'm going to have a cup of coffee in the morning. If I want a glass of wine for dinner, I'm going to have a glass of wine. If I want to measure gay men's erections, then I'm going to do that.

## Olivia

Olivia is a 20-year-old single White cis-gendered woman who identifies as lesbian. She does not identify with any religious identity. She states that she is agnostic, not Mormon. Olivia grew up in Northern Utah in a large extended family of active Mormons. They indoctrinated her with the belief that the only pursuit that mattered is to have a heterosexual family with kids in order to make it to the Celestial Kingdom (the highest level of heaven).

Olivia did not identify with girls her age, even before they became focused on boys. Beginning around high school, she started to realize that what she had been feeling for a very long time were homosexual feelings. She felt confused and tried to figure out what it all meant.

I still spent a lot of time thinking about boys. And thinking about how to present my sexuality in a straight way. But also letting my thoughts linger on girls and trying to figure out if this is how a boy makes me feel, nice I suppose, but this is how a girl makes me feel, all squishy and happy and excited and titillated. What does that actually mean? So that was most of my high school years, just trying, battling back and forth, and figuring out what it meant because I never heard anything, especially in the Mormon Church you are not taught about female sexuality. You're just told no. And I had no idea what anything meant. I kind of figured, well the warm happy feeling of niceness, that's kind of what you see couples doing. They are nice together so that must be attraction or something. And my parents never talked about sex....So I had no idea how things were supposed to work and I basically just drew my own conclusions. I learned a lot on the Internet and from books that I could check out from the library and smuggle home under my covers.

Olivia eventually tried on a sexual minority identity her senior year of high school. Her friends, mostly gay boys, supported her. She describes her high school as fairly liberal compared to other schools in Utah.

I related as bisexual for awhile in high school because I didn't quite understand. I still had the drive to be straight to obtain the goal of the family and even if it wasn't eternal marriage, have the children and the picket fence and have

everything else I was supposed to. But the more I thought about it and the more I tried to date men the more I realized that I wasn't interested in the slightest. All I really wanted from my relationships with men were the ideal that I was supposed to get. I found more satisfaction being in a relationship with a man, than actually being with a man.

After high school, Olivia chose to go to a 2-year college in rural Utah. She now found herself in an unsupportive environment. At a predominantly Mormon school where gender roles and divisions were accentuated due to the peer group's focus on marriage, Olivia went into the closet, her safest option. She lived with five other Mormon women in a college apartment. She put on a mask and pretended to be the good little Mormon girl that everyone expected of her. She attended church, serving in a leadership position in the Relief Society (women's group in the church). Olivia sought an open community online. In the secret of her room, she explored the lesbian community and chatted with women who identified as a sexual minority. In essence, she lived a double life. This began to wear on her. She sought refuge with her friends back home and would drive hours to spend time with them each weekend. She endured an onslaught of homo-negativity from her college environment. One example, when watching General Conference (the semi-annual conference held by the leadership of the Mormon Church and broadcast to all of its members) with her five roommates, she describes:

One of the apostles said something really, really nasty about the gay community and there was a huge controversy about it. And I remember just sitting there and feeling like my blood had run cold and I didn't want to do anything and I was terrified to move because someone would see that I was so angry and crushed that one of the men that I respected so much would say that about me.

Later her roommates discussed how they really like this talk and planned to follow the council advised. Without any support in her immediate vicinity, Olivia



developed depression. She continued to hide behind the mask that she had created. She experienced passive suicidal thoughts, hoping that something might happen to kill. She became reckless with her life, such as not wearing a seatbelt. In the back of her mind, she held the option of suicide. She would cry to her mom about how she did not want to go back, but could never tell her mother the reason why. Olivia prepared to drop out of school as worked with the school counselor on her image of self-worth.

I've always been a very confident person, I've always been involved in theater. I've always just done, just been passionate and not been afraid to show it. But I put everything under that mask and made everything disappear. And I literally could not comprehend at that point what it would be like to love myself for who I was because I was putting so much energy into who I wasn't.

In her sophomore year, she joined a mentoring group. Here she began to connect with people with whom she felt safe being herself. With the encouragement of her counselor, she came out to these peers on a retreat.

It was like a whole wall just exploded and came tumbling down and in that corner of my life I could be open and free again. And that kind of spring boarded me into coming out to everybody else. It was a gradual process. You know, I came out, I was still coming out to specific people who I knew would support me.

Though continuing to attend church on Sundays and participate in church-related activities, she now had a safe group in which she could find respite. She stayed in school and graduated with her associates degree.

And I'm realizing that my sexuality is something for me. It's my own business and I spent so long, especially in my formative years figuring that my sexuality was something for somebody else. Like it was a presentation, it was, it was nice for me, but mostly it was just to make sure that other people knew I was normal.

Olivia has transferred to a University and is pursuing her Bachelor's degree. She no longer attends church and does not believe in the Mormon religion. Her questioning of the Church began when she allowed herself to question its teachings on same-

sexuality. Like a slippery slope, this allowed her to begin questioning everything. She is out to everyone, except her family. “And like I have this whole idea that my life is great I love being gay and out and then I go home and turn everything back off.” She has wanted to come out to her mother, but has not been able to bring herself to disturb the harmony in her family. She believes that when she does come out her mother will be very supportive. At the same time, she fears her family’s reaction because she adores her extended family and cares what they think. “And because everyone in my family is so religious like I have no idea what the consequences of going beyond that accepted line of misbehaving is.”

Olivia still has a goal of coming out to her mother and has attempted to open up conversations with her family to prepare for the conversation she really wants to have.

I’m very vocal about how much I love gay culture and the way I identify. They know all my friends are gay. They know how I live my life isn’t quite in the lines. I don’t tell them everything obviously, but my mom has had the ‘I’m just, I’m not so sure about your spirituality right now’ talk so many times with me. And I’m sure they know that something is up, but actually taking the step and saying hey look I’m gay. I don’t really believe in the Church anymore. Sorry. Is just more than I can handle right now. And I’m working so hard on trying to get, I can handle it. I’m a big girl. I’ve got to come out at some point. I can’t just spend my entire life pretending because I’ve seen how spectacularly that has gone over in the past. But it’s still, you know, it’s fine right now. Nobody is angry at me, yet. So they can just keep on being not angry at me, I’m ok with that.

### Wendy

Wendy is a 38-year-old single Caucasian female who currently identifies as lesbian and agnostic. She grew up in Utah County.

So there was very strong peer pressure to be an active member. My family was pretty much inactive, but I was active myself. I believed strongly in God and the Church principles. For quite awhile I didn’t realize there were other beliefs

systems out there. I know I just took it hook, totally was hooked on it. And like Young Women's, I was in the presidency and was very active that way.

This changed when Wendy turned 15. She started to become more interested in science and this led her beliefs toward agnosticism. Not being able to reconcile the Mormon religion with what she learned about science, she stopped attending church. Wendy reconsidered her religious beliefs at age 18.

I attended church for a while and just you know gave it a lot of serious thought, is this something that I believe in. But something just didn't feel right to me. I had been in college for a few months and I was living with a friend who was active. And I'd always considered going on a mission when I was younger. That had been something I had really wanted to do. So I was thinking about that again. Did I want to add that to my life or not. So I needed to answer that question for myself. And I went to a single's ward and it just wasn't a spiritual place, the single's wards weren't. They were noisier than my home ward, which was mostly kids, young kids. It was really disturbing actually. They were just there to meet other single people. Yeah, so like I did a lot of scripture reading. Soul searching. But I just didn't feel right and you know other things I was doing, exploring the world, were feeling right so I moved toward that a little bit more.

Also in her 18<sup>th</sup> year, she fell in love with her college roommate.

But I wouldn't admit to myself that I was gay. I considered myself bisexual until I was about 26. But at the back of my head I was always thinking, you can accept homosexuality in other people why can't you accept it in yourself.

Bisexuality gave her the "possibility of appearing normal." Wendy "always just kind of felt like an outsider." She believes that her sexuality only contributed to a piece of this. Her family's politics, her intellect, and her gender atypical interest in science and research also contributed to her feeling different in a culturally Mormon city. Wendy believes that she "was born this way." She states that she does not think she has ever been sexually attracted to any men. She has not really thought about sex with men except in a negative way.

[Dating men] didn't feel natural. It was always forced. I had a couple of good male friends you know so I tried to consider them as a crush, but really all I felt

was the most friendship. I don't know it just felt awkward. I've been on a few dates with women that you know I just, it just feels natural and I'm not uncomfortable at all knowing what we are doing.

The experience of coming out to herself felt very cathartic. She thinks that one of the reasons she would not admit it for a while is because of the repressive nature of Utah. She sees same-sex sexuality as a human characteristic. She I thinks she is just self-conscious about being different. "And I know part of that has to be the society grew up in." Wendy did not know other people who identified as gay until she went looking for them after coming out to herself.

Wendy, who has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, came out to her parents about her sexuality during a difficult period in her life because she needed support. Ironically when she came out, she found out that her newly re-activated parents had prepared to go through the temple for the first time, an answer to a prayer that she had made in her youth when she still believed and participated in the Mormon Church.

Well I came out to my mom and she told my dad. And they were pretty upset. It was a really difficult conversation. I kind of felt like I kicked a dog or something. You know it was really hard to hurt someone that way. But initially one of the things she told me was 'I worry about you and the way that society treats gay people,' which I thought was a pretty healthy response on her part. It took my mom awhile to, because we had always had a close relationship, and it took her awhile before we had that one on one thing back again. She was always kind of uncomfortable until she dealt with it. But she always, she's always said that there's no difference between gay and straight people. It's a natural thing. And like my dad had issues with homosexuality so really he's come the furthest. Now he's a big supporter.

Wendy does not have an extensive romantic history. She has been on a few dates and has been sexually intimate with one woman. She has been socially involved with different lesbian groups and has built a community of others who also identify as LGB. Regarding her sexuality she wonders:

Am I asexual? I definitely identify with lesbian and I definitely feel attractions, but I don't feel the need to have a partner. And I don't know if that's because I've been alone for so many years...but you know I feel really comfortable in my skin right now. And I feel like I'm in a really good place. I don't feel like I am empty because I don't have a partner.

Wendy is comfortable with her sexuality identity, but it does not overpower her other identities. "I mean cause the sum total of who I am isn't lesbian. I think it is an important part of who I am, but there's a lot of other things to me." She no longer identifies as Mormon or holds those beliefs.

I still consider myself a really spiritual person. I do a lot of reading on world religions. And you know I think I find beauty in science that a lot of people find in religion. So the reason I classify myself as agnostic is because I don't think that I can say there isn't a God. I just haven't experienced it. So I can't deny somebody else's experience.

#### Heidi

Heidi is a 33-year-old married Caucasian woman who identifies as bisexual and atheist. She recently had her first child with her husband. Heidi grew up in a Mormon household in the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. She believes that her family is seventh generation Mormons. One of her family members worked for a high-ranking general authority of the LDS Church for decades. "And so we knew him, like we would hang out at his house." She participated in all Mormon activities in her youth. At age 12, she served as a youth leader. She describes herself as a "very goody-goody."

I believed in it. I believed that it was, it was everything I was told it was as far as it was the true Church. And if I followed it I was going to get salvation. That somehow I had fallen into the only right, correct church. And I was special and that, but that I also had to follow these rules and guidelines. But I believed that in all of the kind of dogma they were teaching me, as much as you can at that age. I mean I don't think I really believed in the book of Mormon other than I was told to believe in it...I believed people that told me that, so I had faith in them. But when it got to specifics, I don't know how much I believed in that because I was

still pretty young. But I felt like this was the true Church. And I definitely believed that there was a God and in Jesus Christ, definitely. Those were the things as a kid that I felt strongly about.

Like many children, Heidi explored sexuality with her female peers.

We did kiss. And we played all sorts of little games all up until I was like 12 years old. Games as far as like taking off our clothes and you know...you kiss my stomach and I'll kiss your stomach. Very innocent kind of exploring and...I remember being very excited about that. And the two compared...and part of it was also that I had a boyfriend who was very sweet, but you know not, he wasn't doing anything fun like these girls were doing because he was a sweet little Mormon. And these girls were also Mormon...I think we just thought it was a pretend game. And we would do things to like act out things with our Barbie dolls.

Heidi felt guilty at the time about these games and at that age believed that she needed to repent from these activities.

Heidi started questioning the Church at the age of 13. She started to see incongruences and hypocrisy among the members of the Church. As she entered junior high, she made friends with non-Mormons and recognized that their parents, who sometimes smoke and drank, were kinder than some of the members of the Church. Heidi also questioned the doctrine. After experiencing discomfort on a lesson about black skin and the mark of Cain, she went to her bishop for clarification. Her bishop told her not to question her teacher. Her dad then told her not to question the bishop or the doctrine. This caused her to doubt even more. At the same time as these experiences, her mother became inactive as she dealt with effects of sexual abuse that she had experienced as a child. Without her mother actively directing the family to engage in church activities, Heidi also became inactive. Her father stood disapprovingly to the side without enforcing his threats about what they were or were not allowed to do in regards to church activity.

She felt very awkward sexually. Looking back on junior high, Heidi remembers a close female friend and in hindsight recognizes that she probably had attractions toward this girl. In high school, Heidi had a non-Mormon boyfriend. “That was a really intense sexual experience where he was very aggressive and I just sort of went along with it and thought that this was how it's supposed to be.”

At 18, Heidi had a crisis about what to do with her life. She had some friends at the time who identified as Mormon, but did not live strictly by that moral code. This caused her to reconsider if she could be Mormon and still believe and behave as she did. Heidi decided to go to New York for school and she left for Utah for 2 years. Her consideration of accepting Mormonism:

Didn't really last very long once I moved to New York. Everyone that I had met was like ‘oh my gosh you were Mormon. That's like being raised in a cult, tell us about it.’ And that was very, I felt like that, I can't think of the word, not liberating, but that's how I felt that it was kind of like a cult. So it felt good to like oh I can talk about it in these terms. You know and then at that point I never really wanted to go back.

Heidi describes her experience at acting school in New York as a wild time.

We would all just kiss each other and you would kiss men, women, whomever. That was really like just freeing because there was no nothing, like for me it was freeing I think at that age because there was no sort of labeling on it. And I also, we would just say I liked kissing you the best let's continue to kiss.

Due to growing up in conservative Utah, Heidi had internalized homophobia. She started to challenge this in her 20s.

There's some message that's sexual deviance...so that was really scary to me that I might be a sexual perpetrator or deviant...I remember struggling with that also thinking that you know that maybe...there's something really wrong inside of me. So wasn't until I had friends when I was older and that I started to see okay this is okay. These people are in fact some of the nicest people I've ever met...and making friends close friends with people that were out and that sort of blew my world open you know as far as like wow this is what it's like to be openly gay. And it's very different than what I had been told.

Heidi developed a close relationship with a female friend. They behaved in romantic ways towards one another such as cuddling, giving each other massages, and writing poems to each other. It was a very sensual relationship. They had never kissed, but with each other and the idea of kissing. "I was really scared, so although we were kind of like courting each other and kind of sort of already in a relationship we, I just was never able to take it there even though I knew that I really did like her and love her." One night they declared their love to each other. The next day Heidi denied to her friend that she felt that way.

But I was at least exploring and then when I had this experience with my friend that's when I was depressed because I felt like what kind of person am I turning into that denies themselves. I had felt like I was pretty open-minded and then at that point I realized that while I am, that was really not the way I wanted to live my life where I hurt someone because I'm so afraid...that's when I realized I needed to take a hard look at myself and really explore what's going on with me.

With the assistance of counseling, Heidi realized that she did have feelings toward women. Heidi returned to Utah after her time in New York. After another sexual relationship with a man where she had to fantasize about women to get in the mood, she broke up with him and decided to come out. She started to come out others as lesbian. She thought that she never wanted to date men again.

She came out to her family as lesbian. Her family already clearly knew that she no longer identified as Mormon. Her sister sent her a cookie graham that said "congratulations for coming out the closet." Her mother who had never returned to the Church was fine with her daughter's sexual orientation. Heidi felt most scared to come out to her father. Her sister went with her for moral support. "He told me that he felt like you know God still loves me, he still loves me, and...that made me cry and he cried. And he gave me a hug...I could feel the distance, but he was willing to go there so that



meant a lot.” Her oldest brother stopped talking to her. She tried to reach out to him by letter. He told her that he was not going to respond and could not have her around his children. Now they really do not have a relationship.

Heidi exclusively dated women for 3-4 years. On an international trip, she met a man, “a really sensitive, nice guy” with whom she had a sexual liaison. Heidi realized that she could have attractions for both women and men, just a specific type of man. She returned home and this time came out as bisexual.

I do have a couple friends who said, ‘I knew it was just sort of a phase that we knew you really weren't gay. And that really bothered me and I let them know that. Like that's not really the support that I'm looking for you know because I don't feel that way. I don't think that's true, you know. And I don't really, that was a very big deal in my life and it seems kind of marginalized by that statement. And the people that said that, we're not really friends anymore.

She began dating both women and men. Her father felt a relief. “He's probably thinking ok she's straight.” Heidi then moved to the Pacific Northwest and there met her first “real girlfriend.” They lived together for a period of time. Their relationship ended; however, Heidi took important lessons about how to be more nurturing from that relationship and applied them to her next relationship.

A long time male friend asked her out. She had never considered him as a dating partner, but thinking about it she agreed because he knew that she identified as bisexual and did not feel uncomfortable with her past sexual history. Heidi did not want to date someone with whom she could not be honest about her experiences. An emotionally open male, her friend departed from the previous archetype of men that she dated. They had just started dating when her father passed away. Her relationship with her friend evolved into a long-term relationship. Heidi felt able to achieve the intimacy she needed in a relationship, something she had not been able to with other men.

It was definitely how I felt with him because...he was the first person I could talk to about anything and, and I felt fine. I didn't feel ashamed. And I also loved how I felt around him. It was the first time I had sort of felt balanced in a relationship...I think if I had to boil it down to one word it would be trust...I trusted him more than I had trusted anybody...So that's how I knew that I wanted to marry him.

Heidi has been married for 4 years now. She continues to identify as bisexual, although this fact is sometimes hidden by her heterosexual marriage.

It doesn't have to be so black and white as far as like you're with a man so now you have to...only think about men. That's not realistic for me...And so knowing that we're both going to have thoughts of other people and that's okay, but to try to be as open with him as to what I enjoy and...trying to make the most out of our sexual life. But also know that if I have thoughts about women that doesn't mean that we need to get a divorce and I need to start dating women.

### **Thematic Results**

In this section I present the findings regarding women's experiences with sexuality followed by their experiences with religion and spirituality. Thereafter, I discuss factors such as family and community regarding their interaction with this phenomenon. I then present the impact on mental health. Next I show how women reconcile their sexuality with their religious identity with different forms of acceptance. Finally, this chapter will end with the presentation of 5 women from the theoretical sample. Four heterosexual Mormon women (participants from pilot study) and one lesbian transgendered woman's experience with same-sexuality in the Mormon Church provide insight into how same-sex sexuality is experienced by women. The next chapter will discuss these finding.

## Sexuality

Sexuality develops in concert with sexual identity. Women label their sexual identity based on their experiences with sexuality. Sexual identity development involves recognizing same-sex feelings, making sense of these feelings, and finally accepting and identifying one's sexual orientation. Some women go through this process more than once as they continually reevaluate their feelings and experiences. Identity may change throughout their sexual development.

In the following sections, I present in more depth how women recognize, come to understand, and eventually label their sexuality identity. In addition, women's relationship with both women and men will be compared.

### **Recognition of Same-Sex Sexuality**

Women's initial experiences of same-sex attraction occur in a variety of manners. They may, for example, experience crushes, thoughts, dreams, and/or fantasies. Recognition of same-sex sexuality differs from identifying as a sexual minority. After recognition of same-sex sexuality women need to create meaning about those experiences in order to establish a coherent identity.

Women in this study recognized experiencing same-sex feelings at different times in their lives. Some of the women experienced attractions toward other females in their childhood. As girls, women who recognized their same-sex attractions often did not have a full conception about what those feelings meant or a label to attach to their experience. Only a few of the women knew at a young age that their feelings meant they were not

heterosexual. Other women hindsight of adulthood labeled the attractions, crushes, and close female friendships as evidence of their same-sex sexuality.

Recognition of same-sex sexuality may occur without experiencing sexual attractions to other females. Rather than having sexual thoughts toward women, they noted a lack of interest in men. Some women felt different from their female peer group at a young age. Most could not identify why beyond not fitting the ideal image of a woman portrayed in their cultures. Some recognized that, unlike other adolescent girls, they did not focus on boys. Others felt different when they had no desire to find a husband as their peer groups began to get married. A couple of women reported that men they dated told them they were different from other women. Some described themselves as tomboys; they played sports, hated wearing dresses, and were uninterested in “girly” things.

Samantha: But I remember saying a prayer that maybe I could wake up and be a boy. Like I wished that Heavenly Father would change me so I could be a boy. So I remember that...I don't remember being devastated that it didn't happen but, but I remember really wishing I could be a boy.

The stereotype that lesbians play sports persists. Although a couple of women specifically noted that they did not like athletics, four from this sample reported playing competitive sports in high school or college. In some cases, the first people who they knew identified as LGB were their teammates. None of the women in this sample were out when they played.

Andie: I was able to keep myself busy growing up with sports. But then people start to wonder in high school and stuff that if you are not dating and you are into sports, something seems different here.

Other women lived a prototypical adolescence. They enjoyed “girly” things, felt like they belonged to their peer group, and dated boys. Several women did not have

sexual attractions toward other women until their adult lives. Regardless of age, recognition of same-sex sexuality is a powerful experience.

Some recognized the feelings, but tried to ignore them or refused to analyze what their feelings meant. They did not allow themselves to explore or reflect on their experiences. They could not even consider being lesbian as an option.

Kathryn: But I never would even allow myself to think it. It's like the thought would come you might be...No. You're not cause that's not a real thing because the Church teaches me gay's not real thing. I'm just being tempted. I wouldn't even explore the thought. I would just push it away.

For women who wanted to be faithful to their religious identity, they tried to suppress, repress, and change their same-sex sexuality. Rather than reflecting on experiences, they ran away from their feelings.

Holly: Don't think about it. Suppress it. Just bury it. To get away from it. Escape from it. Don't even think about it. Avoidance.

Women attempted to refocus their attention. Parker and Chris tried to live their lives without thinking about sexuality. Daisy Jane tried to fulfill herself through her work and repressed her sex drive through abusing Xanax. Kathryn self-medicated with alcohol. Samantha believes her weight is a way to avoid being attractive to women.

Women also tried to change their sexuality or to at least fit into their religious community by "trying to be straight." In order to accomplish this goal, women pretended to have a romantic interest in men; dated and married men; engaged in therapy, including reparative therapy; engaged in self-mutilation; and increased their engagement in religious activities such as reading the scriptures, participating in church, and attending the temple.

Chris: I used to go [to the temple] sometimes 2 or 3 times a week...and I looked at it like I'm earning my way to heaven and I'm doing this out of a, I'm showing God that I'm willing to do anything to change.

In the end, these tactics do not work. A few women felt like they were not really living life, but merely watching other people live theirs. Their same-sex sexuality did not go away. Eventually each woman had to come to terms with her sexuality.

Judi: I knew what I was and I knew who I was attracted to and I was trying to be something that I wasn't. And it just was not working.

Parker: In my life, literally I've made the choice to be something different and to try to be something different and there was no changing it. There was no making it different. No matter how harsh I was with myself or how kind, it didn't matter. None of it changed the reality of my feelings.

Nicole: And so I kind of was just like this isn't something I should be thinking about, but the more I tried to suppress that, the stronger it got.

Many women felt alone as they struggled with their same-sex feelings. Daisy Jane felt alone, even within her marriage, because she could not talk to anyone about her experiences and did not know other women who experienced same-sex sexuality like herself. This echoes the sentiments of many other women who reported feeling isolated, alone, or abandoned. Women may have these feelings because they may distance themselves from a judgmental family and community for ego protection or their family may distance from them due their sexual identity. Women felt abandoned not just by friends, family, and community, but also by deity.

Isolation came because women felt like they had to hide their feelings due to the cultural messages about same-sex sexuality. Daisy Jane felt that she had to hide her sexuality from God, not even revealing it in prayer. Andie recognized her same-sex sexuality early in her life, but initially determined not to tell anyone. Hiding caused

depression. Andie and Olivia both talk about then hiding their depression because that might lead someone to guess the reason that they felt depressed.

Andie: I started to feel like a fraud because I felt that I was one thing on the inside and had to act something on the outside.

Even if women refused to think about their sexuality, they continued to experience it. Women found themselves drawn to other women and found other women drawn to them.

Judi: But I've always had the energy for women. They're always attracted to me. Men no. Women they were always around. They were always available. And so that just fit really nicely.

Some women who experienced same-sex feelings in their youth believed that they would marry a man in the future according to the life-script that the Mormon religion prescribes. Some women assumed that all girls experienced same-sex.

Ellen: I was very attracted to women...ever since I can remember I was attracted to women. I just didn't think it meant anything. So I remember being 8 years old and finding a dirty magazine that my dad had at his shop and really liking it. I really liked looking at the pictures of women and when I got older I started having dreams and fantasies about being with a woman like intimately...it's weird for me even to think about how that didn't send up some signals for me. I didn't have any frame of reference. I didn't know any lesbians growing up. I didn't know that you could be a lesbian or gay necessarily. I didn't really know it was an option for me so even though...I was attracted to women and dreaming about women and all these things I still thought like I'm going to be married to a man and have babies and go to the Temple and you know it just wasn't in my frame of reference.

Sometimes women, having never experienced a same-sex relationship, grappled with same-sex feelings toward females in general. Women found themselves turned on or intrigued by same-sex scenarios on TV. Some described experiencing a physiological reaction to another woman's touch. Several participants reported that women felt safer and more attractive and appealing than men. They found themselves drawn to certain women, wanting simply be around them. Barbarella found herself compelled to sit

behind a specific classmate. Irene regularly went to an aerobics class because of the female instructor.

Many reported very strong, intimate non-sexual relationships with other women throughout their lives. They developed strong, intense female friendships and sometimes felt more attached to their female friend “than friends should be.” Sometimes this produced thoughts of wanting to be with a particular friend. Women reported feeling jealous and insecurity if a close friend started to develop relationships with other women or men. Samantha and Olivia, for example, first recognized their same-sex sexuality because of jealousy towards their close female friend’s relationship with a man.

Many women originally did not have a way to distinguish the feelings they had for women as more than friendship because they had never felt attraction toward men and did not recognize romantic feelings. Once women associated their feelings toward women as how others felt toward men, society’s describes sexuality or love suddenly made sense.

Quinn: For the first time I feel that joy that I think heterosexual people feel that I didn't know you were supposed to be feeling until I felt the contrast. Does that make sense? It's like oh that's what it, that's what when you're talking about butterflies in your stomach. Now I get it. I didn't understand it before.

More than a quarter of this sample recognized their same-sex sexuality when a platonic same-sex friendship developed into a romantic and/or sexual relationship. Two women, after their divorces from their husbands, first experienced unexpected same-sex fantasies as they masturbated. Recognition of same-sex sexuality also occurred due to intimacy or emotional attractions felt toward other women, rather than sexuality per se.

Samantha: But I feel like I connect with women way better and there's just some certain women...where I'm like oh what am I feeling, you know. Whoa. And so it just feels, there are some that it's just different. It's not the hubba hubba I want



to have sex with her, it's just that sometimes there's whoa something I just, but I feel like mmm.

An outside catalyst may also cause women to question. Irene did not question her sexual identity until her 40s. The Church's political involvement in Prop 8 catalyzed her to question the Church. Subsequently, she questioned her sexuality as she analyzed her strong reaction to the Mormon Church's actions to bar same-sex marriage.

All of the women in this sample eventually recognized their same-sex sexuality. Eventually women connected the feelings they had toward females meant more than friendship. Once women recognized their attractions, they next needed to understand what that meant about their sexuality.

### **Understanding Sexuality**

Many women did not understand their feelings at first. Understanding sexuality depends on information, role models, family/community messages, and experiences. Understanding sexuality moves beyond simple recognition of same-sex feelings. It provides meaning to those feelings and a conviction of the lasting nature of the feelings. It means identifying one's sexual orientation, but not necessarily identifying by one's sexual orientation. It involves comparing one's experiences to available identity labels (gay, lesbian, bisexual) to see if that identity could apply.

One difficulty for the participants in understanding sexuality is that most had no context or point of reference about same-sex sexuality. Even though they recognized their feelings and attractions, they did not have the language (such as terms like homosexual, gay, lesbian) to identify what those feelings meant or they did not want to identify with the stereotypes they held with those terms. Aidan spent her early teen years

in inner turmoil “trying to figure out what I was.” Some women, like Holly, did not understand what was going on as they grew up and not until falling in love with another woman did they make a connection between their experiences and a sexual minority identity. Sometimes a sexual experience with another woman confirmed a woman’s orientation and left no more room for her to question.

Having no social support to understand sexuality makes it more to figure out. Sexuality itself is taboo. Most women grew up in a sheltered Mormon family who did not have discussions about sexuality or allow images of homosexuality. Women internalized compulsory heterosexuality and assumed everyone was straight. Judi even though growing up in a Catholic family still lived within the societal taboo of homosexuality. Mel’s parents had the sex talk with her at age 5, but failed to discuss homosexuality. Andie, on the other hand, knew exactly what her feelings meant. She identified her attractions as same-sex sexuality from a very young age. Her father, a doctor, allowed the discussion of sexuality in the home.

Upon recognizing their same-sex sexuality, women must also grapple with their feelings about sexuality. Understanding sexual orientation does not mean immediate acceptance of a sexual minority identity. Most often women felt guilt and shame about these feelings because of the negative messages about homosexuality that saturated their community. The environment greatly affects how women experience the phenomenon of same-sex sexuality.

Before considering same-sex sexuality, one first needs to consider women’s feelings about sexuality generally. A few women felt repressed from their sexuality in general, not just their same-sex sexuality. Some women felt wrong and sinful for

masturbation or engaging in any type of sexual acts with females or males outside of marriage. Samantha recalls praying to God to forgive her for masturbating and help her to refrain. Chris experienced a panic attack in a Mormon temple because she felt like “the most evil person ever” for masturbating the night before. Heidi felt that she needed to repent for childhood sexual play that she now looks back on as innocent and developmentally normal exploration.

Heidi: After I was baptized and I still had these little girlfriends, I would repent and I felt really like I would have to stop this...I would pray and ask for forgiveness from Jesus from Heavenly Father, from God, and tell them that [I’m] never going to do it again... and I remember feeling dirty and ashamed at like 9 years old about this.

#### Messages about Same-Sex Sexuality

All the women clearly received the message that their religion expected them to get married and have children. The religious community did not talk about sexuality with the girls until about the age of 13. At that point their bishop or some other Church leader gave their peer cohort a talk about sexuality and told them not to have sex outside of marriage, not to view pornography, and not to engage in homosexual relationships. A couple of women received the message that masturbation could lead to same-sex sexuality. Women received the message very early in their lives that sexuality should only occur in a heterosexual marital relationship. Families and religious communities did not openly discuss same-sex relationships as the women grew up and none of the women knew anyone closely (or at all) who openly identified as a sexual minority. The conversations about same-sex sexuality that occurred were often misinformed.

Heidi: But there was no one that had come out or there was no sort of discussion around like homosexuality other than these people we really didn't know.

Jessica: I was just confused. Like I didn't, somehow that never crossed my mind like someone had told me jokingly like 2 years before, 'Well maybe you could be a lesbian.' I'm like no, no, no. I could never be a lesbian. I could never be a lesbian. Because at that point I don't even think we were talking about homosexuality in Sunday school, like I do not remember it coming up in church at all. And then when I got to high school I started to be a little bit more aware of it and when I came out my mom went on LDS.org and was reading me articles about it which just increased my shame because I felt like there was something, you know I felt like defective. I felt like ashamed.

For most women, when they began to comprehend their sexual orientation their initially did not want to experience same-sex sexuality. They tried to ignore the feelings and not entertain thoughts of same-sex romantic or sexual relationships. They refused to self-reflect and analyze their same-sex relationships in which they found themselves. Often they strove to make changes by ending relationships, trying to date or marry men, devote themselves more fervently to their religious community, and engage in therapy.

Their religious beliefs taught them that God wanted them to be with a man therefore their same-sex sexuality was wrong because perfection rested in heterosexual marriage and subsequent eternal families. They heard lay Church members say that being gay is a choice and a result of not living a faithful enough life because God would not create gay people. Farah attempted to understand her relationship within her religious framework.

Farah: [My partner] and I had had this conversation for years, almost every year. Are we gay? No there's no such thing as gay. God does not create gay people. We just really love each other and when the right guys come along then fine, but we'll be neighbors still and best friends. And we'll still be in each other's lives.

They also received messages such as that gay people cannot be happy or have good relationships; if someone is engaging in homosexual behaviors, then they cannot be spiritual; homosexuals are perverted and evil; people become gay because of sexual abuse or because of bad experiences with men; and being gay is a choice and those

choosing to engage in same-sex relationships have made the wrong choice. Women received messages from their religious communities that homosexuality was the worse sexual sin that one could commit.

Lynn: People viewed it as disgusting and gross and people always made jokes about gay people and then in seminary, the seminary teachers would always talk about gay people and how they're actively rebelling against God and they're child pedophiles and they choose to be gay and they choose to be these disgusting perverts basically.

Stargays: Most people would say because you're gay, you've chosen to break away from God so therefore nothing you experience on a daily basis is from Him so you can't possibly be a spiritual person, in-tune with anything in the universe and want to help anybody else out.

Aidan: I mean it's just the logic is such that I just felt like if you're telling someone that their homosexuality is wrong and that they feel that their homosexuality is part of their identity as much as their shoe size or their eye color, then you know you're telling them that there's no possible redemption. There's no possible way that they can be good people.

Implicit messages of hate seep through the official doctrine of love. For example, Chris had the experience of a 13-year-old member telling her, "The church hates gay people and so we're trying to fight so they can't get married." The messages they receive cause them to feel like bad or evil people.

Quinn: And it doesn't feel like a sin. It's like if you were gay I don't think you would feel like it is a sin. I think it feels like that for some people because they have been told that it is. But if they were really to step back, peel back the covers and say how does it really feel to me? Does it feel like a sin or does it feel more natural, for me it felt much more natural, it never felt wrong. The shoe fit.

Women received negative messages about people who engaged in same-sex behaviors. Since they did not know anyone who identified as LGB, no one contradicted these stereotypes. They assumed the stereotypes must be true. Since they personally did not fit these stereotypes, they either did not assume themselves to be lesbians or feared they possessed some inherent evil because of their attractions. Because women did not

know other sexual minorities, they had no models of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person with whom they could identify. They thought that a lesbian identity was simply not an option for them.

Irene wishes she had known gay people in her younger years. Not knowing anyone personally resulted in her negative judgment towards same-sex behavior. She believes that had she been able to build a relationship with someone who identified as a sexual minority, her love for the person would have overcome her prejudice and maybe have allowed her to question her own sexuality earlier. Lynn did not identify as a sexual minority because she did not choose her attractions. Initially Lynn, like several others, believed that living a good life would cause the feelings to go away.

#### Feelings About Same-Sex Sexuality

Kathryn: The most damning thing was in me, my internalized homophobia.

Many women internalized this homophobia. Many experienced guilt, shame, and self-hatred. Because of these messages, many women reported their same-sex sexuality caused them to feel defective or deviant. Women reported hating themselves because of the attractions that they felt. Kathryn describes it as self-loathing. Self-hatred intensified as women continued to have same-sex attractions despite trying to change (in some cases marrying men) or live perfectly according to gospel dictates (reading scriptures, praying, going on missions). Some felt as though they must be broken for not being able to conform to heterosexual expectations.

Rebecca: It's very difficult being LDS and having same-sex attraction anyways. You always feel imperfect. You always feel imperfect.

Stargays: I was reprehensible. To be honest it was, it's almost like I guess what someone would feel like if they figured out they were a serial killer. That level of self-awareness to understand that oh my God I am suddenly what most people consider a deviant person was disheartening.

Aidan: I remember clearly at the age 13, actually even younger age 12, crying because I believed that, that being gay was almost as bad or was worse than being a murderer.

Lynn: And I thought that I was just a bad person and maybe it was just because I was having doubts in the Church or I just wasn't living correctly and that was why I was having these attractions I was having.

Seven women reported that they felt like a bad or evil person because of their sexuality. Women did not believe that they were doing bad things, but they were inherently bad because of their feelings. Most often women went through a period of self-condemnation. Daisy Jane believed her same-sex sexuality made her mentally ill. Both her and Rebecca believed that they were unfit mothers because of it. Self-worth suffered to such an extent that a few women questioned their ability to achieve salvation.

Daisy Jane: I didn't know anyone else that felt the way that I did...so I was pretty sure that I was defective and I was pretty sure too the things that I was learning at church and the things that I was learning about the atonement applied to everyone else because they didn't have this wrong with them, that's so wrong, if you are a Mormon it goes against everything.

In contrast, Nicole did not experience any negative feelings when she reconsidered her sexuality.

Nicole: It's kind of funny because I, every time I thought about them I felt so good inside whereas you know I had always been taught oh if you feel this way, you should feel ashamed, you should feel guilty and I didn't, I felt, I mean I felt Heavenly Father's love for me even stronger than ever.

## Seeking Information

Most women felt confused as they experienced a difference between what they felt and what they learned from the Mormon Church that they should be feeling. Some women had difficulty understanding why they experienced same-sexuality and why reconciling their sexuality with their religion was so hard.

Olivia: The Mormon Church is believed to be a living church. Everything that the prophets say is believed to be doctrine and not everything that they say is intentional, but people take it as doctrine and that gets quoted over and over. And I would almost obsessively try to find things that people had said and like reconciliations and trying to figure out what was going on and how I could force my sexuality into a version of the acceptable Churchy life. And I never did find anything.

Most women sought information to help them understand same-sex sexuality. The information available affects sexual identity development. Resources come from different perspectives and values. Initially, women often sought or were given LDS resources. Publications, which emphasize celibacy and repentance, do not change sexuality, but affect how women feel about their same-sex sexuality. For example, often the resources provided by the LDS Church (such as articles on Same-Sex Attractions at [lds.org](http://lds.org)) often caused women to feel defective and produced negative self-worth.

As Church publications and talks by Church leaders caused greater confusion about sexuality, women expanded their search to a variety of other sources. They sought out others stories, articles from Affirmation (an unofficial gay Mormon organization), research studies, books (lay and scientific), discussions about homosexuality and the Bible, information about the Kinsey scale, psychology classes, and online chat sites. While multiple sources abound about male sexuality, finding information specifically on women is more difficult.



Quinn: It is definitely a process of discovery, but it's fascinating. I mean like most of the books that I'm reading they are so focused on men so to hear that you're actually doing a study on women in the Church is very intriguing because I think we're a voice that's been a minority even in that respect.

Many of the women reported a fascination with the LGBT culture. They sought information about the gay community. They felt drawn to music, events, information, TV shows (such as the L-word, Will and Grace, Buffy the Vampire Slayer), and other people who identified as sexual minorities.

Irene: I was trying to become familiar with the culture and be involved to meet people and just be, not so much for dating or anything but just for familiarity. I contend that I'm one of the best read lesbians out there because I honestly read all these books and try to read as much as I can, just because for me I have to conceptualize something and really, I wanted to understand everything, I don't know if that helps or not, but I read a lot.

Many women sought information by exploring the LGBT community in order to understand a sexual minority identity beyond same-sex relationships. Women engaged in community events and/or online forums. Some temporarily tried on a sexual minority identity in these safe environments.

Olivia: It wasn't the way I would have chosen to learn about my sexuality and figure things out on my own, but it ended up working out all right. And those initial experiences online talking to people gave me a lot more confidence that I needed to go out and live my life in the physical realm the way I wanted to.

Women welcomed other sexual minority women into their lives. Some actively sought out other women who experienced same-sex sexuality. Learning that someone they knew identifies as LGB opened women's understanding of same-sex sexuality.

Farah: And that was a shocking revelation and also an incredibly intriguing one. We know gay people. For the first time in our lives, we know we know gay people. We never had known if we knew gay people before that.

Knowing other sexual minorities changes women's perception of the misinformed stereotypes that they held due to the messages that they received about homosexuality.

Nicole thought that lesbians grew up as tomboys and did not date a lot. Being a girly-girl and boy crazy in her youth, the tomboy stereotype did not fit her experience. Finding stories of women with similar experiences assists in the process of identify formation. Seeing other women live happily in same-sex relationships provided more options than had been previous considered (a Mormon lifestyle or death).

Lynn: Part of the reason as well when I was Mormon that I didn't want to identify as gay was because you know when I thought of gay people I thought of people running around half naked throwing glitter everywhere and things like that because those were the images that were portrayed. But then when I was in [graduate school] and I meet gay people and most of them I wouldn't be able to tell that they were gay unless they told me because they didn't fit any of the traditional stereotypes and they wanted basically the same things as heterosexual people wanted. And so then it was like okay this is a group of people that that I can identify with and I can fit in with because they basically want the same things as anybody wants.

Knowing other people who identified as LGB might mean that they had another person with whom they could talk to about their experiences. Women now had the opportunity to process their experiences with other women in order to understand their meaning. Quinn, despite having had a sexual relationship with a woman, did not recognize her sexual orientation until she discussed her experiences with her current partner. She realized that her experiences fit within a lesbian identity. Just knowing that other gay Mormons exist can help women who feel alone and isolated in the heterosexual spheres they inhabit. This is especially true when women know other women since the large majority of Mormons who openly identify with same-sex sexuality are men.

Rebecca: When I came back I went to what is it called a fireside, and it was for people who have same-sex attractions and it had females there and I was so surprised. I thought oh wow I'm not alone.

## Exploring Sexuality

To explore the possibility of a lesbian identity means opening one's self to imagine what a relationship with another woman would be like and opening one's self to consider the possibility of that type of relationship. Women sought personal experience and experimented with their sexuality, relationships, and identity. Some women explored their sexuality beyond same-sex monogamous relationships. Women may engage in sexual play with friends as a child or an adult. Aidan participated in the leather community. Farah experimented with polyamory. Most women, however, retained their desires for monogamous relationships as their religion taught. The only change was that these women wanted female partners rather than male partners.

Women, despite internalizing negative beliefs, still felt that relationships with other females made sense to them, felt natural, normal, and right. Women experienced feelings that directly conflicted with what they learned in church.

Holly: Because I was comfortable from the first moment that Lori and I were intimate with each other. It was totally fine and nothing about it. It seems just as natural as putting my shoes on and just seemed very comfortable and right and that was, that was the rub. I was, here this felt so right and so comfortable and so me, yet I'm supposed to feel guilty about it. I'm a terrible person for feeling that way. I'm not supposed to feel that way.

Stargays: That was kind of a weird experience I guess because how does something that is like a natural kind of thing also feel like it's the absolutely wrong thing to do.

Because same-sex feelings and relationships felt natural, some women felt guilt for not feeling guilty.

Olivia: I didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong. I didn't have any guilt about my sexuality itself, but just guilt that I was not on the path that I was supposed to be on and almost guilt about not feeling guilty because you are supposed to be so ashamed of your sin. And I didn't feel that it was a sin at all.

And then that guilt about not having guilt would pile on to the other guilt and just a never-ending circle of confusion.

### **Relationships with Women**

Some women have had several romantic relationships. Other women have very limited sexual relationships with women. Some have been in love and some have not. Some women critically analyzed their experiences prior to engaging in a same-sex relationship and other women initially refused to reflect on what their sexual behaviors with other females signified. For women who had not accepted their sexual orientation, they often did not define their first sexual relationship with a woman as they continued to wrestle with their sexual and religious identities. A few women reported developing friendships in which sexual behavior occurred, but the behavior occurred without intention or a prior conversation about their mutual attraction. Rather, women allowed themselves to act on their feelings and then processed the meaning of their actions after they had occurred. Rather than discussing their feelings, Holly and her partner allowed sexual activities to naturally occur and then processed their feelings about each other after the event.

Women did not necessarily label themselves nonheterosexual despite being in a same-sex relationship. Women who have been in a sexual relationship reported feeling fully able to in a same-sex relationship as compared to a heterosexual relationship. Four women describe being in a same-sex relationship as home; wherein heterosexual relationships felt unnatural or forced.

Daisy Jane: I felt like I fit in my own skin for the first time in my life.

Parker: But as I grew up and I looked in hindsight...being with women was very natural. There was no awkwardness, there was no reticence or any of that that I felt when I try to be physical with a guy.

At the same time, most women initially struggled with issues of guilt and shame throughout their first same-sex relationship.

Kathryn: It's funny because you know when we were together it was fine. It was in the moments when I was not with Ann that I was like ugh what am I doing. I know this is evil. You know and then I was like do I know it's evil? No I don't really know it's evil.

Daisy Jane: I felt so much guilt and shame in the relationship for feeling good. I never could resolve that and that is something that we tried to work through [in couples counseling].

Many women's initial sexual encounters naturally developed from pre-existing friendships. The development of romantic or sexual feelings might be met with resistance or reluctance to fully engage in a relationship with another woman because of religious beliefs. A couple of women had strong negative reactions to their first same-sex sexual encounters and reported bursting into tears after having participated in behavior they considered sinful.

The desire for intimacy pushed several women to actively seek out same-sex sexual partners, despite their religious beliefs. Andie reports that her feelings were so strong that she had to live the "lifestyle." To find a partner, Daisy Jane sought out an emotional relationship that she hoped would develop into a romantic relationship.

They hid more than their feelings. They also hid relationships. They hid parts of their lives.

Judi: There was just a lot of secretiveness, a lot of closed doors, a lot of shame about it.

Even while living in a same-sex relationship for years, many women did not tell anyone that their relationships with a specific woman were more than close friendship. The ambivalence they felt between their thoughts and feelings may seep into their relationships. Being in love felt very validating, but unresolved religious conflict created tumult.

Rebecca: It was like...a two-edge sword. One it was great, you know I'm excited. I can't believe that I can feel this way. The other one you almost feel like you're this horrible person like you're doing something wrong. You feel like you shouldn't feel this way. You shouldn't, I don't know, you should be thinking this. You shouldn't be wanting this. Does that make sense? I don't know if that makes sense.

Chris: WOW! That is so cool and yet it is so horrible at the same time.

Relationships might be complicated further by their partner's religious identity.

Rebecca: "She's LDS too and so you know we're both fighting the same values. You know we're all trying to be the ideal Mormon."

Several women attended church with their partners as they both tried to reconcile their beliefs with their relationship. Attending church reinforced weekly the negative messages they received about same-sex sexuality and intensified any guilt and shame they might already be feeling. Many women stopped attending church for this reason.

The stress from personal religious beliefs and pressure from family and community caused women to consider ending their relationships, regardless of the love they continued to feel for their partner. Some women ended sexual relationships because of their decision to live according to the standards of the Church. Family and ecclesiastical leaders forced other women to end their relationship with threat of losing family and Church support if they continued in the relationship.

Quinn: And every time I would have one of those encounters whether it be with the bishop or my parents or my family, my friends I would try and break up with

[my partner] and it would last the duration of the phone call. I couldn't do it. It's like why would I want to give up the love of my life.

A same-sex relationship may be more likely to end due to external factors.

Quinn: But honestly had it been acceptable and had never been anything different in the Church, like if they would have said when I was 22 with my relationship "Oh that's okay, you can have that kind of relationship in the Church," I would have stayed in it. Both of us would have. I think we would still be together.

Several women in this study had the experience of ending or attempting to end a relationship that both they and their partners desired to continue. The love, attraction, and connection they feel toward the other woman remains undiminished. Because of this, some women had to significantly alter their lives in order to avoid returning to the relationship.

Chris: So I ended up quitting my job to get away from her because I couldn't live that close to her and not touch her.

Ending a relationship may be one-sided. Quinn's college girlfriend broke up with her because of religious conflict. Quinn found this experience extremely traumatic and left her devastated. Chris' partner also did not want to break up. Ending a relationship with a woman that she loves and wants to be with represents a significant loss. Sometimes women do just give up a sexual relationship; they also give up a significant supportive relationship. Women are left with little to no support to deal with their loss.

Daisy Jane: And she was the only one who understood...me and she wasn't there.

Giving up the relationship does not make the feelings go away. Several women entered into a cycle of breaking up and then reconciling with the women that they loved as they strove to understand love versus their religious beliefs and the potential community and family losses.

Ellen: I mean it's really complicated because we, I mean there were so many instances of moving in together and moving out and moving in and moving out because of all of this turmoil with my family.

Farah: We...continued for years with this cycle of giving in to that love and attraction to one another and then my just being eaten up with guilt over it and backing away again.

Holly: We defined it back and forth. We were together. We weren't together. We were together. We weren't together. It was back and forth all the time. And all surrounding our standing in the Church.

Women have little support even when a relationship ends for reasons beyond religious values. Women may not have been open about their relationship and may have kept it secret from family and friends. Even if their other social supports knew about the relationship, women could not turn to them for comfort in their heartache because of the disapproval their social supports had felt toward the relationship.

Ellen: And I didn't have a friend in the world and my family, I couldn't talk to them, and anyway so I just went on this downward spiral.

Some women tried to end the sexual part of the relationship, but refused to give up the emotional relationship. Farah and her partner used to say "we gave each other up for God," but they could not fully give each other up and continued to share their lives. Holly and Lori also refused to move apart from each other. Judi knew she would still be friends with her lover despite her bishop counseling her to never see this person again. Other women had to cut off all contact because they could not be near the woman that they loved without touching her.

Rebecca: I try not to talk to her because it's been asked of me. So if I love her? Yeah, I still love her deeply...If I'm single will I contact her? Probably. Do I think she's perfect? Yeah, for me yeah. I do. I don't know. It's hard. It's very hard.



For women who first experienced same-sex attraction within the context of a relationship, some questioned the situational factor of their same-sex feelings. Ellen, Barbarella, and Kathryn wanted to believe that they simply loved with this one woman and that did not indicate a same-sex orientation. All of these women tried dating men, but none experienced heterosexual desires.

Kathryn: Exactly. Not that it was about women in general. Just that I was really close to her. And like I try to put it in that category. That she and I had a connection, but clearly that's not what I want. That's what I tried to tell myself.

### **Sexual Abuse**

Ten women, slightly less than half the sample, reported sexual abuse in their childhood or youth. As I did not ask women directly if they experienced sexual abuse, the revelation spontaneously surfaced when some women told their story. At least one woman categorically denied ever experiencing abuse. It remains unknown if the other 12 did or did not experience sexual abuse. Some women reported only one incident of sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member, neighbor, or a trusted authority. A couple of women experienced repeated sexual abuse throughout their childhood by their father or stepfather. One woman's abuse occurred in her high school years by a trusted male teacher. After being raped by a stranger at age 14, one woman sought guidance from her bishop. Her bishop blamed her for what happened and took away her temple recommend believing that she had sinned sexually and needed to repent.

Sexual abuse is often implicated in the culture for causing deviations from heterosexuality. For some women, they believe that this holds true.

My mother's husband is one of the most nasty creatures on the face of the planet. And he frankly was my, probably my first experience with men and if, and I have

no doubt but that experience that I had with him, those years that I suffered through him essentially kind of perhaps drove me in that direction. So whether or not I would have turned out gay anyway I can't really say, but I do have to say I'm pretty sure that was a significant driver for me.

Other women wondered how the sexual abuse impacted their sexuality.

I really don't want to be offensive but I feel like it's not normal if you develop in a good environment with, I just feel like develop the appropriate relationships with your same gender and then the opposite gender that you're going to develop as a heterosexual, but if something screws that up then I feel like, and I feel like that explains, that explains some of the reasons.

I didn't choose to be this way. Whatever made me this way, whether I was born this way or whether I got made this way because of the experiences I had between the ages of 4 and 12. Whatever made this way, we don't know, but the point is I am this way.

LDS Family Services told at least two women that childhood sexual abuse must be the cause of their same-sex sexuality. One woman believed this for many years, but then through additional nonsexual experiences with men, such as co-workers, and accepting her sexuality in general, she now rejects this theory. Some parents also reinforced this message. Realizing her parents would assign the abuse she experienced as causation of her same-sex sexuality, even though she had experienced same-sex feelings prior to the abuse, created reluctance for one woman to come out to her parents.

A few of the women in this sample questioned whether their early experiences created their sexuality or whether sexuality is inherent. A couple of woman talked about how their negative experiences with men steered them toward same-sex relationships. Other women expressed that the abuse may have been reasons that they held negative views toward relationships with men, but that their sexual orientation toward women is separate from that experience. A few women felt able to form healthier relationships with women than with men because their relationships with men replayed their abuse.

I had some sexual abuse by an older male member of my family and so I interpreted it and I still do, I interpreted those...early relationships with men as being a form as coming from the abuse part of myself, the victim...I was seeking out relationships where I was still being in that cycle, I was still being abused and...the guys...exhibited the that abusive sort of, the abuse of power in a relationship and that's what I was like drawn to, that danger.

It should be remembered that just as many women who identify with same-sex sexuality did not experience sexual abuse. Many women stated that they do not understand why God made them this way. Regardless of the reasons women may experience same-sexuality women agreed they did not choose their sexual orientation.

Andie: We may socialize toward this as we grow older, but this isn't a choice. And I think, they are going, if not today, then someday find something in our genetics that predisposes us to be this way.

Most women believed that they were born this way. A few recognize environmental factors in play. Nicole acknowledges that her same-sex sexuality further developed because of her negative consensual heterosexual relationships. Samantha hints that her attractions toward women might be connected to her desire for the mother figure she lacked in her childhood.

### **Heterosexual Feelings and Relationships**

Experiencing same-sex sexuality does not necessarily preclude heterosexual feelings. Part of understanding their sexuality meant comparing these experiences to their experiences with men. Given our heteronormative culture and the strong pressure to marry a man, all of the women had to critically reflect on their feelings towards males.

Most of the women in this sample report that they have never (or only slightly) experienced physical attractions toward men. Only 3 of out of 23 women indicated some degree of heterosexuality. Mel identifies as heterosexual. Heidi and Samantha identify

as bisexual. Two are happily married to men, who are supportive of their past same-sex experience. Samantha would like another opportunity to marry a man.

Heidi at one point in her life identified as lesbian and thought that she would never date men again, but then with further experience realized that she did have attractions toward certain types of men.

Heidi: I just have a lot more I'd say confidence with who I was selecting as far as a man. You know that was the difference then when I was younger and had a few experiences with guys I wasn't picky and I attracted some real like, just men that I didn't feel safe with.

The other 20 women all identify as lesbian. Most women who identified as lesbian have dated men. A few found themselves very popular with the boys and dated often, mostly because that was what they were supposed to do. A few women who did not have much experience dating men believed in their youth that they had just not met the right man. Even though they had crushes on women, they believed that they would develop those same types of feelings for a man at some point. Others avoided dating all together. Regardless of the amount they dated, none of the women who identified as lesbian felt fully attracted to the boys or men they dated.

Some lesbian women noted that they do not understand men. They did not feel able to connect with men on levels with which they can connect with women. Lesbian women experienced men merely as friends. Many reported never experiencing a desire to date or get married as expected by their religious culture. In order to compensate for their true feelings, a few women pretended to have crushes on boys in order to fit in with their peers and to convince others, and themselves, that they were “normal.”

Lesbian women dated men in an attempt to reconcile their sexuality with their religious beliefs and sometimes to overcome the loss of a same-sex relationship. Lesbian

women who dated men reported not wanting to be sexual with them. They felt no chemistry or had a negative reaction, such as repulsion. Being sexual with a man felt “unnatural” and forced. Many lesbian women reported that they dated very nice men and still did not feel attraction. Men expressed attraction and even desires to marry many of these women, but women did not reciprocate the feelings that some men would have toward them.

Daisy Jane: For me dating a guy is like going out with a piece of cardboard. There’s no emotional response. There’s no physical response.

Before women recognized their same-sex sexuality, they assumed their own heterosexuality and attempted to live the course outlined for them. Both Barbarella and Stargays believed that the men they dated must be the problem and the reason their relationships did not work. Recognizing their sexuality caused them to realize that they may have inhibited their heterosexual relationships. By comparing their feelings towards men with feelings they now have toward a woman, lesbian women can identify their lack of desire for men.

Barbarella: And in my mind I thought I feel like this is what other people feel like when they like boys. And it just sort of hit me for the first time ever that probably the reason I hadn't really ever dated or been sexual in anyway was less because of my religion keeping me from meeting the right guy or keeping me from having sex with a guy and more about not being attracted to men at all, and not really realizing it.

The heteronormative culture compelled some women to experiment sexually with non-committed male partners because of curiosity and the desire for experience. The women who had sex with men often reported that they did not feel aroused. Men often commented that women did not respond sexually to them the way other women would.

Even Heidi who has engaged in sexual intercourse with both men and women, and has enjoyed both, notes a difference.

Heidi: I definitely find that women are I think more sensitive as a sexual partner and they don't need to be told as much what to do.

Aidan had consensual sex one time with a man. Aidan states, "I had weird feelings about it because my first thought was yeah you know this is pretty good. My second thought was there was no emotion though." This experience helped her to realize that while she could have sex with a man, she felt incapable of sustaining a romantic relationship because she felt no emotional connection.

Those who have been sexually abused often stated that they were afraid of or very angry towards men. Some reported that they never thought about sex with males except in a negative way. Women felt safer.

Five lesbian women chose to marry a man in order to meet cultural expectations. Daisy Jane, despite wanting more than anything to be with the woman that she loved, chose to marry a man because of family and religious pressure.

Daisy Jane: Well it was just hard, but I knew I had to do it. It was kind of that feeling. Like this is what I have to do. It's not about what I want. It's what I need to do to be a good person and for God to love me again, like pleasing God was important to me.

A few wanted children and looked for a man who would be a good father.

Daisy Jane: I always feel that was the only way that I could have children too was to marry a man and I really wanted to be a mother. But, there are more opportunities now.

All five of these lesbian women felt like something was missing in their marriage.

Nicole: I really mainly only had like two serious [heterosexual] relationships growing up. And they weren't, they never treated me right and I figured that was what was missing.

Although most of these women cared about their husbands, they did not feel sexually attracted to them. Women had to mentally put themselves in the place where their body would be sexually responsive. It did not occur naturally and took effort. Daisy Jane married a man with whom she thought she could make the sexual piece work. They had a sexually relationship for 10 years and satisfied each other sexually; however, Daisy Jane has had the experience of vomiting after having sex with her husband. She never felt able to fully connect to him.

Daisy Jane: It's that part of me when I'm with the woman, it's, I don't know how to explain it...I don't know how to put it into words. But I just know that I could not, I could not share that with him. I didn't even know how, and he knew that. And he could feel it. And it was between us. And when I am with the woman, it's all there. It all makes sense and I can share all of myself.

Rebecca and Quinn also had the experience of never connecting in certain ways with their husbands. Both of their divorces hinged on the fact they knew they could be happier with women and believed that their husbands would be happier with other women.

Rebecca: But I believe that there are situations where like for my instance, even though I'm still married, it's very difficult, very difficult being married because my husband doesn't feel loved and it's very difficult because there's always that issue there. It's just very difficult on, I feel it's difficult on him and it's difficult on me, and we have 3 children and it's difficult on them because they can see it. No matter how old they are they can see it. So I feel there are moments where, I don't know, people shouldn't be married or they should be single because of these issues.

The 5 lesbian women who married men all divorced, some because of their sexuality in addition to the personal struggles their husbands brought into the marriage. Parker and Nicole, who divorced for reasons other than their sexuality, still did not want to put themselves through another heterosexual marriage. Most women who identify as lesbian have completely shut themselves off from the possibility of ever marrying a man.

Andie: I'll never get married to a man because that's not what it is all about. It would not be fair to the guy or to me. That's not where my feelings are. Maybe in the next life since we are promised the wishes of our heart. In the next life, maybe.

Others are somewhat open, but doubtful.

Irene: [Marrying a man is] always a possibility because I don't consider myself a 6. But also I haven't met a man that I think that could work with and it would be more of a platonic friendship I would think than a true relationship. And so I don't, if I had done that it would have been more for my family I think than for myself because I would have been sacrificing something.

Holly: I am definitely more attracted to women than I am to men. So like on that scale I am way over to the women's side. But that doesn't preclude that I would ever not be attracted to a male. But I definitely find women more attractive than men. I don't ever view myself with a male, I really haven't ever viewed myself I guess married to a guy.

## **Gender**

How does gender factor into a woman's sexuality? Does gender even matter?

Only three women discussed their preferred gender characteristics of potential partners.

Lynn prefers feminine gender because "if I would have been attracted to more masculine people, I would have been attracted to men in the first place." Mel on the other hand does not consider gender in her potential partners. She focuses more on their personality and common interests. Jessica states that she would be open to dating a transgendered person and thus by extension she would have to consider herself open to the possibility of experiencing attractions towards a cis-gendered male. Other women do not discuss gender per se, focusing mostly on the biological sex of their partner or potential partner.

Women may also question their own gender when questioning sexuality. Most women did not talk about their gender, mostly likely because they are cis-gendered and have never had a reason to question their gender. For example, Andie states that she is



happy being a woman and has never wanted to not be a woman. Only Olivia, however, actually self-identified as cis-gendered. Olivia knew other people who challenged gender identity and that provided her an impetus to question her own gender. She identified as genderqueer for a month in high school; but on further reflection, she realized that she felt comfortable with her identity as female. Her internal sense of gender matched her gender assigned at birth. Olivia states that she is happy to be a girl.

Aidan on the other hand did not feel comfortable in a woman's body and felt more like a boy in her youth. In her 20s, she transitioned and lived as man for 5 years. After living as a man, she realized that she did identify as female and recognized that her desire to be considered an equal to males fueled her desire to be male. Even while accepting her femaleness and no longer living as male, she still identifies as genderqueer. Her sexual orientation remained static throughout her gender transitions. Samantha experienced a momentary wish to be male, not for the sake of being a male, but for the privileges that it offered. Samantha recalls one moment with a female friend when she "felt super strongly" that she wished she were a male because she loved this woman and "would totally marry her." Being a male would allow her the legitimacy to marry this woman. Samantha has not experienced this wish since.

### **Accepting a Sexual Minority Identity**

Constrictions placed on self by religious beliefs may stall recognition of sexuality. Some women did not allow themselves consider the possibility of a sexual minority identity until their adult years. They may feel delayed in their general sexual development or feel like they have "catching up" to do.

Barbarella: I sort of kind of chart my own development because I feel really in a lot of ways behind you know. I hear this often from other people who identify as gay in general, not just Mormons, that we didn't have the same experience growing up as teenagers and the same exploration of dating and sex and that kind of thing and so a lot of us are behind.

Part of understanding sexuality is realizing the permanence of same-sex feelings. Not one woman in this study, regardless of how righteously she lived, reported a change to a heterosexual orientation after identifying as a sexual minority. For these women, it begged the question of why one would continue to experience feelings of same-sex sexuality despite living the values of the gospel is one is not supposed to feel that way. Sexuality did not make sense in the way it was taught—assumed heterosexuality.

Women become more certain of their sexual orientation as their sexuality does not change regardless of their religious devotion or continued engagement in heterosexual relationships. As women recognized that their sexuality orientation would not change, they sought acceptance of their sexuality.

Stargays: And so that's, it didn't matter how much I prayed or how much I went to the Temple or how much Scripture reading I did, it didn't go away. It didn't, I wasn't being healed. Sometimes that's just not the way things work. And so you know at some point you just have to whether it's conscious or not you have to make a decision you know what this is the way things are and I'm going to have to figure out how to be okay with it and just embrace it and hope for the best.

The Mormon religion teaches that family is all-important. Women were taught to desire a Temple marriage because it is a requirement for their eternal salvation. Same-sex sexuality is not acceptable and therefore one should not and cannot accept this trait within herself. From these discussions, women came to believe that same-sex behavior is a grievous sin akin with murder and adultery. These messages drove some of the women to self-hatred.

Daisy Jane: So then going to church all of those messages are reiterated to me over and over and over.

Understanding sexuality often means coming out to self. Sexual orientation is not sexual identity. Recognizes and understanding one's sexuality may not result in the acceptance of a sexual identity label. None of the women who spoke to me identified as strictly heterosexual. Mel comes the closest to identifying her sexual orientation as "mostly straight." While possible for women to experience same-sex sexuality and never challenge their heterosexual identity, that was not the case for the women in this sample. All acknowledged their experiences with same-sexuality signified a nonheterosexual identity.

Understanding their sexuality meant acknowledging the permanency of their feelings and the recognition that this did not fit the heterosexual story line they had expected. For some such as Daisy Jane, Quinn, and Rebecca it meant acknowledging the reality of their experiences after trying to create the ideal heterosexual Mormon family. For women such as Heidi, it meant accepting and embracing both her attractions towards women and men. For Mel, it meant honoring her childhood experience as a representation of an acceptable part of her sexuality. For Ellen, Farah, and Holly, it meant allowing themselves to love the person that they loved. Coming out is an on-going process where a person's recognition of same-sex sexuality and their evolving understanding of what their experiences mean begin to culminate in the formation of an internal sexual-minority identity.

Holly: I'm really notorious for by researching things. So I went and looked at the research and looked at Kinsey, and the scale, and where am I on the scale, and I'm like oh yeah it's not just black or white. There's a scale here. And of course later on I found the other models of sexuality too...It's almost like an awakening. I let myself think that, that I'm possibly not heterosexual. And so the floodgates just

came open and I just wanted to research and find out more and I was obsessed with “The L Word” and trying to find out what was the life like and what are people like and what do I identify with?

This process can cycle multiple times as internal awareness of sexual orientation solidifies into a comprehensive sexual identity. Even though Kathryn had a coming out moment with her first sexual experience, when that relationship ended she tried to convince herself that she was in fact heterosexual and it had only been attraction to this solitary woman which did not indicate an enduring orientation. Barbarella almost immediately came out to others when she first fell in love with a woman. She too re-questioned her sexual orientation when her relationship ended and tried dating men before fully accepting her lesbian identity.

Identifying as a sexual minority involved active work in which women engage in order to understand their sexuality. As women understand their sexual orientation, they begin looking at their past to identify experiences that in hindsight confirms this identity. Nicole, for example, read through her old journals seeking signs from her past for supporting evidence of her current same-sexuality. Wendy stated, “It was very cathartic when I came out to myself” because all of her crushes fell into place and her experiences finally made sense. Coming out to oneself regarding sexual orientation often leads to accepting a sexual identity.

Parker: But the first time I actually said it out loud I was actually talking to my therapist about Tina and I said I’ve fallen in love. I’m in love with someone. And she’s like that’s wonderful. And I’m like well it isn’t actually you know and I told her and, and she was very supportive. She was wonderful and then she used the word lesbian and it was like a whoa the horses this is, it was the first time I had allowed myself to absorb that label in connection with myself and it was days while I just went back and forth between no I’m not. Yes you are. No, no, no. Well, yes you are.

## Sexual Identity

Just as it is one thing to recognize same-sex sexuality and another to understand the meaning of those experiences; it is also one thing to accept your sexual orientation and another to accept a sexual identity. Choosing how to identify is a process. Most of the women in this study identify as lesbian. A few accepted lesbian as their initial identity label, but some waded through questioning identities such as same-sex attracted and sometimes bisexual.

Farah: To identify as bi, which I find is a safe-ish steppingstone. I haven't left the safe heterosexual world, but I'm admitting that I am attracted to people of the same sex.

Olivia: I was still bridging the gap between lesbian/bisexual. I liked to fall back on the bisexual. I'm not totally lesbian. Don't get me wrong boys are still nice, but...So I used that kind of as a scapegoat to make things seem easier for me.

Wendy: I think it's totally the possibility of appearing normal because you could potentially have a male mate and have a normal relationship and I think in my mind that was easier to deal with them thinking that regardless of who I am in a relationship with I'm going to be different.

Barbarella: I think for a long time I didn't necessarily identify as a lesbian. I just sort of wanted to and I wasn't comfortable with the term bisexual either I just I mean really I just wanted to identify as a woman who loved women. And I still identify that way, but as a lesbian now. I'm fine with that word I think it's easy to interpret is why I'm okay with that word. But yeah I don't know I think I was a little uncomfortable just coming out and saying I was a lesbian. I was more comfortable saying I was gay. Which I don't know why like now it seems sort of faraway and foreign to me.

In contrast, Heidi identified first as lesbian and then later reassessed her identity given her experiences and now identifies as bisexual. A couple of women choose to identify based on their relationship to the person that they loved. Rebecca fought against her same-sex sexuality her entire life. Rebecca will call herself a lesbian now that she has decided to form a long-term, committed relationship with that woman that she loves,

but does not necessarily identify with the label. She believes that the term lesbian is a label society has created to categorize her identity as a woman who loves woman. All she knows is that she is in love with her partner. Mel represents the counterpart in that she labels herself heterosexual, despite acknowledging same-sex sexuality, because she is in a relationship with a man.

Mel: I more or less noticed personality versus gender and I had a couple of friends that were girls that if you know if they were gay I would have gone out it with them in a heartbeat, but they were straight. And it just happened to be that I met my husband and it didn't matter that he was a guy, just mattered that he was a good person. So for me I don't, I only really consider myself straight right now because I happened to be married to a man, but if I had met a girl first then, you know what I mean I would have considered myself lesbian because I would have been with her. So for me I don't know.

Samantha presents a good example of the complexity involved in understanding and defining same-sex sexuality. Samantha assumes a heterosexual identity and practices celibacy, which is aligned with her religious identity. She admits that if her religion allowed it, she would identify as lesbian because of her emotional connection to women; at the same time, her desires are oriented slightly more toward men than women.

Samantha: I don't want to sound naïve or stupid, but and this is why I think I'm bi is because I really think sex is a lot better with a penis personally, I really believe that.

Holly provides another example of struggling to define identity based on her sexuality.

Holly: Well I definitely don't, I am definitely more attracted to women then I am to men. So like on that scale, I am way over to the women's side. But that doesn't preclude that I would ever not be attracted to a male. But I definitely find women more attractive than men. I don't ever view myself with a male. I really haven't ever viewed myself I guess married to a guy, I guess, looking back. In movies and things I, when there would be romantic scenes I would be viewing it more out of the guys point of view then the girl's point of view as far as the relationship. So I don't know how to answer, I've never really known how to answer that other

than to describe myself as gay, but I'm more attracted to women than men. So I don't know where that puts me.

Irene placed herself in the 4.5 region of the 0-6 scale because she believes that she would have recognized her same-sex feelings before the age of 40 if she were a 6. At the same time, she identifies as lesbian and not bisexual. Irene like many other women recognized the possibility of having a heterosexual relationship and yet believed such a relationship would ultimately not be fulfilling.

Irene: I would always long for that, for a female relationship just certainly the emotional part, the sort of physically as well because that's a big deal for me too, but I don't know I just couldn't imagine all that happening with a man. I think that you could have part of it, but not all of it.

Identity is not fixed and can be challenged by new experiences.

Jessica: I remember talking with my therapist...like worrying that I wasn't gay like. And I'm like I have to be gay. And she's like well why. And I'm like well the last 5 years I've like lost, I feel like I sacrificed a lot of relationships. Like I've given up my religion and my family and if I'm not gay what does that mean? What if they were right and it was just a test of the devil. So like now I'm kind of afraid not to be gay, if that makes any sense...a lot of my identity is, is built around the fact that I'm gay.

## **Sexual Fluidity**

Many women independently marked their identity as 100% lesbian or a 6 on the Kinsey scale. Most of these women believe that they were born with their sexual orientation, but do presume that every woman with same-sex sexuality is like them. The fact that a few women could make a heterosexual marriage last several years because of some connection to their husband suggest they possess a small degree of fluidity. A minority of women, in general those younger in years, felt open to the possibility that future experiences might shift where they feel their sexual orientation is currently at. A

couple of women wondered how much of their environment and the experiences of their youth shaped their sexuality. Both Irene and Nicole believe that their same-sex sexuality has changed throughout their lives.

Irene: I think it's developed...I read Lisa Diamond's book Sexual Fluidity...I think it's absolutely true. Maybe less so for me because I feel like I'm asexual most of the time. I don't know why, but yeah my feelings have intensified. And maybe it's just once you, once you recognize what you are that it's easier to be what you are. I don't know. It's probably way back my brain somewhere but it feels like, I feel like I'm able to, to feel more because I've opened myself up more because I know that I was closed for so long just because it's a no. No. It's a flat no and so there's so much that I think that I didn't experience just because I wanted to be good or something. I don't know what it was. So yeah I think it's developed certainly in the past couple or 3 years it's intensified for me. And after I had slept with a woman, then it's intensified even more of course because I'm all like whoa what the hell was I doing for 40 years. So yeah, I think, I think it changes.

Nicole: I understand that I, I mean at this point in time, I don't want a man touching me. And I know right now I am attracted to women and I am fascinated by them. I want to be with one. And maybe that will change in time. I don't know but that's how I feel right now.

For Holly, accepting her sexual orientation and allowing herself to fully be in her same-sex relationship allowed her to experience more attractions to men than she did in her youth. Aidan recognizes some sexuality fluidity after her one sexual encounter with a man. This experience showed her she could enjoy sex with a man. However, she believes that this is because she learned at a young age to separate sexuality from love. So although she might be able to enjoy sex with a man, her sexual fluidity does not translate in an ability to love a man romantically. A couple of women who have not yet experienced a same-sex relationship felt open to the possibility of being with a man, although thought it unlikely. Irene and Nicole also reported experiencing change in their attractions.



Nicole: I think part of it probably does have to do with my relationships with men, which isn't all that uncommon.

### **Intimacy and Religious Beliefs**

Sexuality is more than just genital sex. It is an intimate connection with another person that can include intellectual, emotional, and spiritual connections, as well as physical. For women who do not marry men, the Church offers them the choice of celibacy and loneliness that supposedly mirrors the same struggles that single heterosexual women face, except for the hope of having a romantic partnership some day. Andie has committed herself to a life of celibacy because of her religious beliefs.

Andie: I still have those feelings, but well I've consigned myself to a life of being alone and that that hurts.

Many women chose celibacy at some point in their life. Some women attempt to practice celibacy after having engaged in sexual relationships. Samantha also consciously chooses to remain celibate, but hopes for a heterosexual marriage because she does not want a lifetime of celibacy.

Samantha: So I don't, but right now I just have to. Here I am single again and I'm just going to be celibate and it sucks. But I don't know that there's any other choice that I can make that will still keep me where I want to be in the Church.

Family may try to push celibacy when women come out. Women have to decide how they are going to live their lives. The desire for intimacy is the desire to share one's life with another person to whom they truly connect and who understands them. Women want more than just sex.

Aidan: But I'm hoping very much that gays and lesbians still are as qualified for salvation even if they choose to not be celibate. Because the other side of this is I don't believe that people should be forced to be alone and maybe that's the protestant side of Mormonism that I just don't believe in celibacy. It isn't very

healthy. Some people just aren't sexual at all and that's fine, but not even just in the world of sexuality but in the world of emotionality people are not meant to be alone. And I think that God knows that, that we were created to be a people to always look for friends and companions.

The emotional aspect draws women to form same-sex relationship. The emotional connection often prompts women to give themselves permission to experience the physical connection.

Rebecca: I think because of our emotional relationship that we have with each other and we are still so compatible with each other. Yeah it feels natural. It feels right. I mean I can feel closer to her than I can feel closer to anyone, then I've ever felt closer to anyone. So I mean it feels, I enjoy, I enjoy it because it does feel so emotionally close.

Sometimes these emotional needs could be filled through platonic same-sex friendships. Yet, platonic friendships did not fulfill the full need for intimacy that includes both emotional and physical connections with other women. Women experience conflict not due to their emotional ties, but due to their sexual behaviors.

Holly: It was definitely sexuality because that's the thing that was the conflict...If it was just the love part, there would be no conflict. You know I could just, I'll just love you. But it was definitely the sexuality part that was hard because there was so much sin around it you know and...it was definitely the sexual part that was the conflict for me.

Other women, like Samantha, feel satisfied with their emotional relationships with heterosexual women and do not want to push the relationship further. This may be different if the woman returned the romantic feelings. Not all women crave intimacy. Wendy has not had a desire for a romantic relationship. She admits this might be due to "a fear of intimacy." However, she is happy with her life as it is.

Many women struggled or are currently struggling in their ambivalence between wanting an intimate relationship with another woman and wanting to practice their

religion. A couple of women recognized that they tended to sabotage same-sex relationships because of this on-going conflict.

Andie: What would happen and what started to happen is that I would find someone that I really cared about and we cared about each other. And I'd think this is the person I want to settle down with and we would start to settle down and it would start to eat at me so bad I'd start to sabotage things. And push them away and feel guilty and become so uptight because I...needed the Church in my life. And I was living counter to that. But I love this person so eventually I would sabotage the relationship until they would go away. Then it would go for a while, I've gone to church the whole time since I've been back [to Utah]. But...I'd ruin the relationship so they would go away. And eventually I'd want someone there so I'd bring someone back into my life. And I meet some really good people that I did not treat very well because I really wanted that relationship, but then it became so difficult for me to bear that I couldn't stand it anymore so I'd start to sabotage things.

### Sexual Identity and Religious Identity

Sexual minority identity development is difficult in general and religion adds an additional layer of complexity. As women come to understand their sexual orientation, they must also make sense of how their orientation fits within their belief system. Accepting a sexual minority identity does not always mean rejecting their religious identity. Andie still identifies as a lesbian even though she chooses celibacy in order to remain active in the Mormon Church. Deciding how to act upon same-sexuality includes reflecting on the eternal nature of their sexuality. Most women have come to believe that their sexual orientation is an enduring trait, one that they were born with and one that will remain with them in the world beyond. Some women hoped that in death they too will have the opportunity to be with the women they love forever, as the Mormon Church promises heterosexual spouses. Other women believe their same-sex sexuality is only an earthly experience.

Andie: I don't want that to sound harsh. For myself, I just have always believed that we were given sex and sexual preference here as part of the test to see what will do with it. And will we, will we be respectful for the procreation process and...I mean that doesn't mean that she won't have extremely close female friends or male friends in the next life. I just don't believe all people are going to have the same feelings in the next life.

Samantha: I can address it this way where I feel like I'm making a sacrifice. And I don't get, I'm not mad at God or anything about that because I think that's what we have to do in life sometimes is sacrifice.

Many women believed that a Mormon identity and a sexual minority identity to be incompatible lifestyles. These women felt as though they had to choose between their sexual identity and their religious identity. They could not have both and something must be sacrificed. Women made different choices between the two identities at different times in their lives, sometimes choosing their sexuality identity, sometimes choosing their religious identity, and sometimes trying to balance both. Their choices often reflected environmental factors.

While hiding relationships or LGBT associated activities, they also continued to be active in the Mormon Church or pretended to be active and believing in the Church. Irene would put on her garments when going to see her family so they would not question her spirituality.

Olivia: At that point it was a complete separation between the two. And I would almost change personalities, like I would be much more vivacious, much more outgoing, sarcastic, enjoyable to be around with when I was with the people I was comfortable being out with and I would kind of turn everything back off and go and be the polite, restrained normal Mormon girl with my roommates, with the people I knew from church.

In essence, women began living two different lives. This is not a universal experience. Some women did not did hide their same-sex sexuality at all once they recognized and understood it. Many women did try to live for varying length of time in

the two different worlds of Mormon and LGBT, while they tried to figure out their identity. They allowed their Mormon community to assume that they unquestioningly continued participation in the Church. They held the façade of being an active and fully believing Mormon, while engaging in the LGBT community or having sexual relationships with other women.

Irene: I felt like I was just drowning. Lying all the time. Here I think I'm a good person and I think I am, but you can't be consciously a good person and intentionally lie and deceive people it just felt yucky.

The dual life felt dishonest in both respects because women represented themselves one way to Church associates and another way to the LGBT community. They could not fully be themselves in either world. While playing with her new friends at night and going to work for the Church during the day, Irene felt "like I was a bad Mormon. I'm a bad lesbian. I'm not good at either one of these." Andie who continues to live in both worlds to varying extents admits that she does not feel authentic in either because there is always a part of her missing from each world. Each world holds certain expectations of the women.

Stargays: It was one of those situations...like walking a tight rope if you walk too much to one side or the other, you're going to fall off and somebody's going to be terribly unhappy about it. So and at the time actually I was not only participating in the LGBT community when I could, but I was also military and I was also actively participating in the Mormon community. So I had 3 different cohorts of people if you will who for whatever reasons thought that I belonged solely to them. And so it was a very, very stressful time to figure out how to negotiate that effectively.

Women struggled with their decision about how to live their lives, whether to live the moral standards of the Church or to engage in same-sex relationships. The internal conflict made Daisy Jane want to stay away from the Church that she loves. The conflict and struggle that women feel between their religious and spiritual identities can seem

disproportionately large when first trying to reconcile and deal with reactions from family.

While most women experience some conflict between their sexual and religious identity, some did not. Some women found it very easy to discard their religious identity or had already done so by the time they questioned their sexual identity. Women experienced conflict to varying extents depending on how closely they identified as Mormon, how strongly they identified as a sexual minority, and how their family responded to them during their process of identity formation.

### Religion

All of the women, except Judi who converted to Mormonism, were born into a Mormon identity, which means their families engrained within them this identity from birth. All women had at least one period in their life where they regularly participated in Church activities such as attending weekly church services, reading scriptures, praying, attending religious classes and/or family home evening. About half of this sample still retains a Mormon identity. The other half no longer identifies as Mormon.

Many women participated in the Mormon Church because of an intrinsically motivated desire to please God and a sincere belief in the doctrine of the Church. These women considered their religious identity a core part of their self-identity. Other women never strongly identified as LDS or did not fully believe in everything that the Church taught.

Olivia: I've never had all that strong of a testimony. I've tried really, really hard. I just never felt as much as I feel other people have. But I know there's people who have wrestled with it even more than I have and coming to terms with what

they genuinely believed in because it was true, not just because they were told it was true.

A few women fluctuated in their activity and/or belief in the LDS Church for reasons not related to sexuality.

Daisy Jane: I drank and smoked a little bit...and that was rebellious to be doing that in Utah County and I had friends who we partied on weekends and I think that is a mixture of the culture of a small town as well as rebellion.

Those not active in their youth tended to reconsider their beliefs or ability to fit within the religion during their late teens or early twenties. For some, that meant returning to activity in the Church. A few women rejected their Mormon identity prior to ever questioning their sexual identity. While they may have re-considered Mormonism for a brief moment, they choose not to return to the religion.

Most women born into the religion felt pressured to behave and believe a certain way. These women reported engaging in religious activities to make others happy. Some described making decisions their families desired at their own detriment. Women may attend church or go through the Temple in order to avoid rejection by others. They lived their lives trying to please parents and leaders in the community.

## **Missions**

Seven women served a proselytizing mission for the LDS Church. The reasons that they chose to serve varied from desiring to show their commitment to God to escaping the heterosexual pressures of their community. A few reported that the benefit of going on a mission meant not having to think about dating. The LDS Church allows women to serve a mission at the age of 21 and women typically serve for 18 months.

During this time, they are prohibited from engaging in any heterosexual romantic relationships and are required to be with a female companion 24 hours a day.

Daisy Jane: I had a great experience. I loved it from the minute the airplane landed on the ground to the minute that I left. I loved it. And I didn't have to date boys. And that was the best part. That was the best part. I didn't have to think about trying to date a boy, a guy. That was the best part, for 18 whole months. It was wonderful.

Most taught a faith that they held dear to their hearts at the time and saw positive change in the lives of the people they taught. Not everyone had a great experience however. A couple of women reported discomfort with teaching aspects of the Mormon religion that they did not truly believe themselves. While women did not have to think of dating men, they continued to experience their same-sex sexuality. Parker and Rebecca reported internal conflict when they felt attractions toward some of their companions.

Parker: I went on a mission and...did have feelings for not all but some of the people that I was with, but again it was just that really painful struggle just that I can't even let myself think it and feel it let alone express it to anyone or say it out loud or anything else.

Farah met her first partner on her mission and Holly met her partner when she served as a missionary in Holly's ward. Given that women spent their time with a female companion according to Daisy Jane, "If there's one place that you are going to find out whether you're gay or not, it's definitely on a mission." By the time she returned home, she knew with certainty that she wanted to live her life with another woman. Most women, however, returned home with the desire to achieve the next Mormon milestone of a Temple marriage.



## **Conflict, Guilt, and Shame**

The conflict that women felt between their sexuality and their religion caused guilt and shame. Not every woman felt conflict because of her religion. Some women experienced conflict with their sexual orientation because of their families' religious beliefs and the subsequent effects that a sexual minority identity would have on their relationships with their family.

Not all women experienced guilt. Quinn did not feel guilt about her first same-sex relationship. Barbarella also did not experience guilt when she engaged in her first same-sex relationship.

Barbarella: None. None whatsoever. I felt no guilt. I felt no guilt about the Church. I felt no guilt about God. I felt no guilt about being gay. None. I felt free. Totally free for the first time. It was awesome.

Many women did experience conflict directly due to their religious beliefs. Daisy Jane could not resolve her shame and guilt when involved in a same-sex relationship in college. Holly describes herself as being wracked with guilt due to her same-sex relationship. Guilt and shame intensified when women engaged in religious activity.

## **Church Leaders**

The guilt felt by some women pushed them to seek repentance after engaging in same-sex relations. The Mormon religion believes that one must repent of homosexual behavior by confessing to a bishop. Many women talked with a bishop during the course of their journey, a few never have. Most of the women who spoke to their bishop did so willingly looking for spiritual guidance. External circumstance forced the disclosure due to inadvertent discovery in other circumstances. Some women, despite experiencing guilt,

have never talked to their ecclesiastical leaders about their same-sex sexuality. Samantha has not confessed her sexual experience with another woman to her bishop due to fear that she will not be trusted in her Church position working with the female youth. Stargays never confessed because she knew from her bishop's office would be another place of condemnation.

Bishops responded to the disclosure of same-sex sexuality in a variety of ways. Some bishops responded with kindness and helped women live within the dictates of the Gospel, as they wanted at the time. They showed love and concern. Several bishops did not know what to do with the disclosure or did not understand meaning of this experience to women's lives. Some bishops just shut down the discussion of sex in any form and did not create a safe space to discuss concerns.

Jessica: Because when I came out to my bishop, well I didn't necessarily. I just told him I liked a girl and that I'd done more research online. And he was like did you act on any of that? And I said no. He said well then carry on essentially. He was very dismissive and that made me feel pretty shitty because I'm like oh I'm glad that my, my feelings are, can be so easily dismissed by you.

Lynn: He basically just said well just don't do anything. Like you know feelings of attraction are not a sin, as long as you are not doing anything then you are fine. And that was like all he said...I mean I was kind of disappointed I guess because I, like this was a topic that I was having a great deal of concern about and he just kind of brushed it off. I realize now that it was probably because he didn't know how to deal with the situation, but for me at the time it was yeah, I was looking for advice and it felt like people just treated this issue lightly.

Quinn's bishop created a traumatic experience due to his bias about the cause of same-sex sexuality and belief that Quinn should repent of the choice she made. Parker too felt abused by her bishop's reactions. Both Judi and Kathryn stopped attending church immediately upon a negative encounter with their bishop due to his response to their same-sex sexuality. Because women are taught to see these men as spiritual

leadership who are divinely inspired, they became disillusioned when these men did not respond in the right manner. Not all women hold negative feeling towards Church leaders. Some are able to critically look at their experiences and see the good intent despite human foible.

Olivia: Like the Church itself is made up of intelligent men who are, I feel are trying to do their best. They have, a lot of them have a very specific worldview and they try not to look too far outside of it. Like they want to take care of their members the best that they can and that doesn't always, the vision of the members doesn't tend to include the people who fall through the cracks, who don't fit into it.

Andie sought answers about the Church's perception and response to same-sex sexuality from a Church leader who had been a spokesperson for the Church.

Andie: I really want to know how the Church handles this and what the brethren really think. I said because to me this is serious. I said you know it even made me attempt my own life even though that goes against everything I believe and he said honestly we don't really know. He said the brethren don't know how we are going to be judged. Nobody knows but Christ himself. And basically he said what I already knew that it's not a sin to be gay. It isn't a sin. To act on it, to have sex is a sin just like it would be if you were heterosexual. And none of that makes you feel any better.

Even though the Church teaches love above all else, the message that seeps through congregations is a homophobic belief. The Church's actions and contributions during the Prop 8 campaign intensified this sense that the Church vehemently opposes same-sex relationships. This incident created a raw spot for many.

Several women pointed out the seeming paradox between what the Church taught and how Church members practice those teachings. Mel noted the contradiction between the Church's emphases on love, unless the person happens to be gay. As some families refused to associate with the women in this study because of their "sin," women noted the contradiction between these actions and the actions of Christ.

Daisy Jane: The Savior that I learned about all my life was not that way. Like he lived his life with sinners and I think we all are sinners. I feel like if we are the Church of Jesus Christ that my ward should be able to know that I'm gay and be okay with that and let me do the same as they do.

Farah: Did you ever see the Truman show?...I feel like I grew up being told something like that. This is the way the world is. This is how we're supposed to interact with it. This is how we act like God and Christ...and then one day my reality changed and everybody else stopped acting like they didn't really believe what they had told me I was supposed to believe in the face of my reality shift. And of course it was their reality shift too. But it was my life.

Heidi: All that bull crap you're spewing about unconditional love is, I don't think it's possible in a religion with these kind of black and white standards.

### Fit Within the Church

It is not just the Church's stance on same-sex sexuality that affects women. Many had previously felt discounted as a female in a patriarchal institution. Several women felt blamed when a man had hurt them. When Quinn ended up in the hospital due to her first husband's abuse, her bishop asked her what she did to make her husband so angry. Some women felt second place, less valued, and less important than men. Many women saw inequality within heterosexual relationships. Because of the emphasis placed on the priesthood, Parker felt like she disappeared in the Church after her marriage because of her husband's inactivity.

Kathryn: I had a hard time with the Priesthood from, I would say from my mid-teens on because it seemed like the Priesthood ought to be a little more exclusive club than you have a penis and you may join. I didn't, it wasn't one of those feminist things where I thought I should have the Priesthood. It just seemed like I knew people who I knew I respected their Priesthood more than they did. And that bothered me.

Some women did feel excluded. For example, Aidan's conflict with her inability to have the Priesthood in part fueled her gender questioning and transition. Many

women, however, accepted the belief that men have their role and women have their role. They felt equal to men. They did not feel dismissed within the religion.

Regardless of a woman's feelings towards differential roles, many felt different and excluded in the Church when they failed to meet the feminine ideal. The woman saw the ideal female portrayed as cookie cutter images of a reserved, married "Molly Mormon homemaker," and stay at home mom. Mormon culture provided a very clear standard of gender conformity and most of the women in this study felt like they could not be what they were supposed to be.

First and foremost, women were expected to be heterosexual. All participants clearly understood that the Mormon community expected them to get married and have children. Women assumed that their lives would follow this course. The expectation of marriage included getting married in the Temple where Mormons believe that spouses can be sealed together for time and all eternity.

Kathryn: That's my whole purpose in life was to marry and to have children and to be a wife and mother.

Olivia: The happy family. White picket fence. Your Church calling. Celestial kingdom. Eternal family. All the endgame things that are repeated so often and this is supposed to be your goal. You are supposed to want the classical ideal of a family and just everything so traditional is the only way to live your life. And the only way, the only thing you should be pursuing. Like I always got the impression that you can be an intellectual. You can go to school, that's good, but especially being a woman you don't really need to. You need to go have a family. You don't need to get a Master's degree. A bachelor's is nice, but just go have some babies.

Many women could not understand why this was life's ultimate pursuit when marrying a man was the last thing that they wanted to do. Stargays never saw heterosexual marriage as her idea of perfection. While Irene never longed for a husband, she does long to be a mother. Many women tried to fulfill that which was expected of

them; however, most have been unable to obtain or maintain a satisfying heterosexual relationship that they desired to be everlasting. Women received the message that regardless of other achievements if they never married or had children, then they were failures.

Lynn: I realized that no matter what I did in my career, no matter how smart I was or how capable I was in other aspects of my life, if I were not married and if I were not having kids I would always be second class in the Mormon Church and I would always be pitied and it would always be like oh it's okay you'll get married one day nobody's loved you yet, but you know you'll find somebody one day and oh you will get the opportunity to have kids in the next life or whatever to have all these blessings that everyone else supposedly was having. But...growing up with it I didn't have the confidence or self-esteem to stand up to that and so I felt second-class much of, most of the time.

This feeling like a second-class citizen reverberated throughout multiple interviews. Women felt like a second-class citizen within the Mormon Church as a female, as single, and as a sexual minority. Chris feels second-class within her family and notes that she and her relationship are not treated equally to that of her siblings'. Andie, even while living the standards of the Church, feels like an outcast because she does not have a spouse or children. Many of these women felt like they did not fit in the Mormon culture and by extension the Church due to the Church's emphasis on family and being single adult women without children, they felt the Church no longer spoke to their needs and their experiences.

Stargays: I didn't fit in the Ward that I was in because everybody there was married, everybody had kids they were all like 15 years younger than I was these happy little Mormon couples and I just didn't belong there.

Andie: Sometimes it's painful being in something so family oriented knowing that I am going to be alone.

## Religious Abuse

Women who continue to identify as Mormon face the threat of excommunication if they engage in a same-sex relationship. This is one reason some women stop practicing the religion even though they believe in doctrine of the Mormon Church. Women who actively participate have to choose to live according to the standards the Church expects or not be open about their experiences.

Aidan: I just pray for the day that someone will say oh there is some doctrine that you fit into and that you don't have to be excommunicated. I mean I live in fear of excommunication sometimes if I were to tell the bishop, so I don't tell the bishop.

Using the threat of excommunication to influence a woman's choices is one example of what some women report as religious abuse. They defined religious abuse as Church leaders abusing their authority over the women or attempts by family and community to use threats towards the woman's salvation to control her behavior. A number of women's siblings threaten to not allow them around young nieces and nephews. Quinn's family and friends tried convince her remain in the Church and with her husband by telling her if she engaged in a same-sex relationship she would not get to see her children get married in the Temple. Parker's bishop told her that she and her daughter would not be together for the eternities if she did not remain faithful to the Church.

Parker: To me manipulating the most remarkable relationship I've ever had and using that to control and to cause fear and to manipulate them I found incredibly abusive....So that's part of what I see as religious abuse that causing fear and using that fear to control and get what you want from people, the kind of behavior that you want from people, whether it's right for them or not. But then I see the same thing with my family. I mean I think that my own mom is, even though she's an adult and I hold her accountable for her choices, on the other hand, knowing my mom's history I understand why the Church is so important to her. It was a salvation to her. I mean it was a place of connectedness for her so the

conflict that she feels between me and the Church is no small thing for her and I understand that. But that again is the kind of thing that the Church instead of saying you're a mother and you know your child and you have your maternal instincts and honoring that and respecting that, they use that connection they have to create a divisiveness between me and my mom and me and my family...every time my mom becomes more open and receptive and understanding, there's another statement by the Church or another position taken by the Church that causes her to take a step back, causes her to question those maternal instincts she has as a mother toward me because she has such a connectedness to the Church and I see that as abusive towards her. I'm deeply saddened by what I know is a huge conflict for her, it's just, it has to be incredibly painful for her. I don't always agree with her choices, but I certainly understand the conflict that she's engaged in.

Women described other instances of trauma and pain due to their experiences.

Much of this pain came from others judging them. Some women reported witnessing and or experiencing a sharpness in the religion due to members' and clergy's reactions to same-sex sexuality. The boys in Aidan's youth cohort literally beat her up because she did conform to gender expectations. Being forced to give up relationships with women they loved in order to remain within the Church or to avoid rejection by their families also caused trauma.

Daisy Jane: I felt like I had found what I wanted and what I was looking for...I felt like I couldn't ever have that and so I was lying to myself. I don't know. It doesn't make sense when I say it out loud, but that's how I felt. And I felt like I had been lied to. I don't know, not by God, but I don't know by who else. You know what I mean? My body is made this way. I'm obviously programed. That's how I respond and I felt happy...Why couldn't I have that and have everything else too? And we had, she and I had like I said a spiritual connection. We had the Church in common...I didn't understand why it couldn't all fit that way. Where that made sense to my body and really to me. But, but in the Temple what we learn is not that. So. I guess I probably felt lied to by God, but I never looked at it that way.

Kathryn of abruptly stopping her participation in the LDS Church due to losing belief in her spiritual leaders and the subsequent loss of community and support "was pretty traumatic actually." Several women think that the Church does not realize how



much they cut people up and how much they hurt women due to producing feelings of exclusion and isolation. Several women believed that church should not make one feel so scared.

Two women who underwent Church discipline due to their same-sex relationships felt deep pain due to the process of the punishment. Quinn describes the difference between the support she received at the end of her first marriage compared to the traumatic experience at the end of her second marriage as her bishop quickly moved excommunicate her for her same-sex relationship.

Quinn: I think when I went through my first marriage it was just like you can cling onto the Savior and your family and you have this church support network and so it was like I felt the spirit and I felt taken care of; whereas in this situation I have not felt that at all. And most people would say it is because you made a bad choice. Because you have lost the spirit, you don't have the gift of the Holy Ghost with you anymore. But I think it's honestly the way the Church handles it.

Although her local clergy considered excommunicating Rebecca, those choose to disfellowship her instead. Disfellowship means that one cannot fully participate in the Church such as not being allowed to offer a group prayer or take the sacrament. Disfellowship is less severe than excommunication because one retains their membership in the Church.

Rebecca: It was horrible. It was just horrible I went through at least a year of hell, at least a year of hell. There are moments that I still go through it and it's hard.

Women also inflicted pain on themselves due to internalizing the homophobia in their environment. Two women engaged in cutting or self-mutilating behaviors as a form of punishment and/or control.

Lynn: I think part of it actually stems from the fact that I was recognizing I was having same-sex attractions and I felt like a bad person. And so I think the

recognition that I was having those feelings was a major factor in me starting self-mutilation.

Aidan: I think sometimes when you are in emotional pain, just by cutting, the physical pain takes concentration away from the emotional pain. Not that it swallows your emotional pain, but just the concentration is different.

Not all women experience trauma due to their internal conflict and the external responses to their same-sex sexuality. Women who held their religious identity more strongly, had difficulty reconciling their sexuality with their religious identity, and those who had negative interactions with families or Church leadership appeared more susceptible to a traumatic experience because the experience create a greater threat to their sense of self.

Andie: I guess the main point that I would want to get across and for anybody to understand that it has been a huge battle that has taken a spiritual, and a emotional, and a physical toll. It definitely has affected me in every area of my life permanently.

## **Religious Identity**

The Church provides one script that all women are supposed to experience. Most attempt to varying degrees to conform to this script. Most of these attempts fail. Many women spend years and decades grappling with their identities. They do so without support because families and communities refuse to acknowledge that not every woman fits within the heterosexual script provided.

Parker: There are other realities and when we pretend that they don't exist we cause extraordinary harm and pain.

While women do not necessarily have to choose between their sexual identity and their religious identity, they do have to choose how they will engage with those identities. They need to choose whether or not they will identify as a sexual minority and whether or

not they will engage in same-sex relationships. They also need to choose whether or not they will practice the religion. Making these choices is a process. Sometimes the choice is easy. Most often it is very difficult.

Just as sexual identity and religious identity are two separate identities, so are the choices of whether or not to identify as a sexual minority and whether or not continue to identify as Mormon. The choices do not occur in isolation from one another, as the decision often ties the choices together because the Church places restrictions on ability to practice the religion if engaging in same-sex relationships. Women who identify as a sexual minority may or may not identify as Mormon. Several women relinquished their Mormon identity prior to questioning their sexuality identity and thus did not experience conflict between their sexual identity and their religious identity. Other women found their Mormon identity very easy to give up once they acknowledged their same-sex sexuality. For most, a sexual minority identity directly impacted their religious identity either by challenging the identity or challenging their ability to practice their religion.

Samantha is the only one at this time who does not openly acknowledge her sexual orientation and assumes a heterosexual identity. All the other women's sexual identity reflects their sexual orientation. Most women attempted to achieve heterosexuality prior to accepting their homosexuality. They identified with their same-sex feelings when they could not force themselves to fit within a heterosexual identity. Prior to making the choice to identify as a sexual minority, women first had to allow themselves to acknowledge their same-sex experiences.

Acknowledging same-sex sexuality does not mean that a woman will act on it. Choosing to engage in same-sex relationships results in one not being able to fully

practice the religion while being open and honest about the relationship. Accepting a sexual minority identity is a difficult decision because it may mean giving up family, culture, and community. It may also mean giving up beliefs.

Lynn: I mean there were things growing up that I liked about the Church. That was one of the reasons that made it difficult to leave because I liked the sense of community. I liked the social activities that we had several times a week. Just yeah the sense of support that you get from that and knowing that if you have problems people will be there to help you and this comforting illusion I guess that there's life after death, that you're going to see your family again and you're going to be with them forever. Like those sorts of things I liked and those were the things that made it difficult for me to leave the Church.

Women did not make this decision to identity as a sexual minority or to engage in same-sex relationships lightly due to the impact of their decision on their families, including their children. Most often their experiences with same-sex sexuality compelled them to adopt a sexual minority identity. They chose to accept this identity because they could not deny their feelings and the pain of hiding this part of themselves from everyone became too great a burden to bear.

Holly: I just hit the tipping point. I just hit the point where I couldn't take it anymore. And I think that you get to that point and people are just different. I think in every coming-out story like the pain of being in the closet, the pain of believing what the societal norms say or your church or, the pain of that becomes so intolerable more so than the coming out, that that's what tips you over. And the pain of it, the pain of being without Lori, not being able to be open and be with her and be intimate without all of that. The pain of all of that was too much and it was to me better to be open and to be with her than it was to deal with all of that pain.

The choice to pursue or to be open about a same-sex relationship often coincided with the choice of whether or not to practice their religion. Women saw limiting and constricting options.

Quinn: Okay so it's like my choices are: a) I stay in a marriage where I'm miserable, where don't trust the guy, and it has huge sexual issues anyway just for the sake of my eternal family. b) I live a life of complete celibacy, so I don't see

how that's a life of joy for me in any way. That's just a life of loneliness. Or c) I get to share my future with the love of my life so I have an emotional, physical, mental, every kind of spiritual connection you could with a person. It's like huh I wonder which one's the right option for my personal happiness irrespective of what everyone wants for me.

The process of identifying as a sexual minority often came after some resistance due to their religious beliefs that it was not a valid identity. Women's choices are often directed by a desire to be honest with themselves and others. They wanted to live authentically, whether that is in or out of the LDS Church. Women sought what felt right to them and what made them happy. Because they learned that participation in the Church and living according to its standards is supposed to be the source of happiness, most first tried to conform to Church standards. When they were not able to find happiness and peace in this course, they allowed themselves to challenge whether this was the right course for them.

Chris: I believed that I had to earn my way back to my eternal family. Bottom line: don't have sex outside of marriage. I'm gay so I'll never be married; therefore, I'm never going to have kids. Therefore, I'm going to have to be the best aunt to my nieces and nephews that I possibly can and continue to go to church. I'll serve. You got to go out there and visit the sick. I did all that. But...my idea of the Church was that this life, this whole thing of this life is only a moment and everything. Your life might not be happy here, but it's worth it in the end because eternal salvation is worth it. And that was the hardest thing to give up. And I finally said, excuse me, but just fuck it. I want to be happy and I'm happy with a woman...when I go to church I'm miserable and isn't religion supposed to make you feel good.

The decision to challenge their religious identity and subsequent beliefs may come in part due to their experiences with same-sex sexuality. Many feared what choosing not to participate in the religion would mean to their salvation. Two women literally believed that they would be struck with lightning when they made the decision to become inactive in the Church.

Quinn: I mean I think a lot of it was if I was not a member of the Church the decision would have been very, very easy for me. I would have never broken up with her one time. Never. As I think I had that big Church conflict of oh my gosh am I going to, and this was a true thought in my head, am I going to go to hell for this. Am I going to lose my eternal salvation for this? I mean that was something I have really struggled with.

### Participation in the Mormon Church

Choosing not to participate in the Mormon religion does not mean that one has dis-identified as Mormon. Women who maintain their religious identity must choose whether to participate in their religion and in what ways. Often when women first chose to stop participating or to participate less, they maintained or questioned their religious identity without fully relinquishing it.

Samantha is the only woman who has never had a period of inactivity in her life. Andie returned to full activity after many years of living in a same-sex relationship. Both are trying to live according to the dictates of their hearts as full practicing members, even if that means lifetimes of celibacy.

Andie: Because my belief, my testimony about why I'm here and where I'm going, it is all about that. This isn't the real, for me and my beliefs, this isn't the real life. This is just a probationary period, a test period, where in the whole scheme of eternity this is just a few seconds...And do I feel like I'm capable of certain things and achieving certain things, yeah, I do. From a religious standpoint do I believe that as far as, you know when they talk about the celestial kingdom being over thrones, dominions, and principalities and worlds and, to me the whole wonder of that and being a part of that and learning that, and learning the mysteries of God and, you that's where life, that's where existence really is.

Samantha: Even though I feel like I disappoint God and I let him down, I've never felt like he can't love me or doesn't love me and I guess I feel lucky about that because I just, I really feel, I feel like I'm disappointing Him, I feel bad for myself that I'm not showing my love for Him but I know that He still loves me no matter what I do...I feel really blessed that I haven't got that really dark, dark spot of wow I'm a terrible horrible person that God can't love me...I don't know if I would feel that way if I chose okay forget it, I forget the Church I'm going to go

be gay if I would still feel, I feel, maybe I feel like He still loves me because I keep trying, maybe that is why I keep trying is because I'm afraid he would stopped loving me if I didn't try, but I don't know. I don't know.

Aidan left the Church because of the lack of acceptance that she felt and then returned due to desire to practice her faith and to belong to the community. Daisy Jane desires a same-sex relationship and because of her belief in the Church has been trying to maintain activity as she pursues a relationship. Participation in the Church may alternate depending on whether women need to remain in the community for support or temporarily leave due to anger or pain from the negativity that they receive from the religion.

Each woman has different levels of belief in the Church that do not necessarily correlate with their participation in the Church. Women stopped attending church for many reasons. Many women became inactive as they simultaneously lost belief and accepted their sexual orientation. Holly, Kathryn, Rebecca, and Barbarella stopped participating because of falling in love and developing a relationship with a woman. Judi and Kathryn had a negative experience with a bishop. Farah felt as though God abandoned her when she sought his help. Chris, Irene, and Mel became inactive because of the Church's stance and involvement in issues related to same-sex marriage. It is difficult to maintain activity when one identifies as a sexual minority because of the negative messages that are constantly being promulgated.

Lynn: And so I just stopped going because I got tired listening to how gays are threatening the family and all this super conservative dialogue.

Women also became inactive due to reasons unrelated to their same-sex sexuality. Nicole felt uncomfortable in church after her marriage ended given the way her ex-

husband made her feel about the religion. Heidi began experiencing grey in a black and white world. Wendy developed other beliefs.

Even though not participating in the religion, women may still believe or wonder whether the belief system is true. Quinn, pushed from her religion due to excommunication, must to decide whether or not to maintain a connection with the community that rejected her. Other women also question if they will return to activity in the future. Some women continue to strongly hold onto their Mormon identity, while others nebulously identify with the religion without being certain of their beliefs. Some women stay in this space of inactivity and some identification as Mormon. Other women move beyond to completely disregard the religion and their Mormon identity.

Lynn: I mean breaking away from the Mormon Church was in some respects almost as hard as coming out to myself as being gay.

Parker: It was a physically and emotionally and mentally horrible process. I mean it just was tearing the, the ties that I had to something so important was you know it was excruciating. It was physically taxing and emotionally taxing and yeah it was, I mean you're challenging every real and meaningful belief you've ever had. And it's a mean process. It's an unkind process. I don't think the Mormon Church really understands how, how violent and how devastating and how horrible that process is and how they create that.

## Beliefs

All women in the study reported having full faith in the Mormon Church at one time, even if the period occurred in their childhood and they did not have a mature understanding of the religious beliefs. About four women say that they have never doubt the teachings of the Church.

Samantha: I have never doubted. I've always just known it was true...I know that you can hear God speak to you no matter what religion you are, but I have



just always known that this is the true Church and I've always had a testimony about it.

Andie continues to practice her religion despite this pain. She is 1 of 4 women who identified as Mormon and continued in active participation in the LDS Church at the time of this study. The other women, despite holding a Mormon identity, no longer engaged in religious practices because of feeling like they do not belong due to their different identities as single, female, and gay.

Those who continue to participate are selectively out with whom they discuss their same-sex experiences at church. Two women, while not openly out at church, have discussed their same-sex sexuality with their bishops and will disclose their same-sexuality if asked by other Church members. Daisy Jane welcomes any real conversation that members of the Church have with this issue. Some people in Aidan's ward know that she identifies as lesbian because she transitioned back to female while attending this ward. She, however, is not out to her current bishop for fear of reprisal. Samantha does not feel comfortable disclosing her orientation to anyone. Andie and Aidan re-activated after years of inactivity. Daisy Jane is trying to maintain her church activity as she starts dating women.

The other half of the sample no longer holds a Mormon identity or the beliefs associated with it. Women who rejected their Mormon identity experienced doubt in the religion for various reasons and felt forced to critically examine their once firmly held beliefs. Many women who dis-identified with the Mormon Church stated that they believed because their families taught them to accept the religion without question. A couple of the women believed that Mormons grow up fully brainwashed, with sheep-like mentality, and are not allowed to think for themselves. More women, however, believed

that “brainwashed” does not accurately reflect their experience. Rather than seeing themselves or their families as brainwashed, they recognized that they simply never had any other option beyond the Mormon Church and they absorbed what they knew. They had no context that other beliefs even existed because of their insular community provided by their religion.

Irene: I look back and realize that yeah I was, I don't want to say brainwashed because I think that's overused, but I think there was an amount of inexperience and naïveté where I didn't know anything else. And so I held fast to what I knew.

Olivia: Being raised in that culture and not being presented with any other ideals, I think has a huge, huge influence in the way we think of ourselves and the way we react to things.

Being taught from youth how to practice the Mormon religion made it easy to practice. It did not even occur to many women to question the religion. Some women who chose to leave the Church did not question their beliefs when they did so. Sometimes this final disconnect occurs years after women initially stop formally participating in the Church. Farah, for example, left the Mormon Church in which she still believed. She did not reconsider her beliefs until years later.

Farah: We had just never turned around and started to pull apart what we used to believe in. We just got on with our lives.

Chris: It's just it's so weird because I don't know what I believe. I really don't.

A few women still have not questioned their beliefs in the Mormon Church and its doctrines. A few of the women who left Church activity without questioning their beliefs worried that they could easily fall back in the pattern of Church practice to which they had grown accustomed because participating in the Mormon Church felt normal. A couple felt afraid to question.

Irene: I don't know it's just that it was for so, so intense for so long, so familiar, so all-encompassing that maybe I don't think that I am strong enough to look at it yet from a different perspective...I'm not strong enough to challenge it yet. You know to say what that's not true because. I don't need the answer, but I need to be strong enough to say look this could be true or it couldn't be true but, I just don't, maybe I'm not unbiased yet. I don't know...maybe I'm afraid it's true. Oh that's a bad one because then it's like oh great now what do I do? I think it's been easier to poke holes in the Church and still not reconcile the Church with my sexuality, but at least I can say well it's not totally true so sweet I got a leg to stand on. What if it comes to the Church is absolutely true and I'm still gay? Do I have to be celibate forever? That sucks. That's not a, that's not something I want to do. So I don't know, maybe it's just fear.

Quinn's excommunication from the Mormon Church forced to her question her beliefs.

Quinn: I still believe the Book of Mormon is true. I would never deny that. It's another Testament of Jesus Christ given in the Americas. I cannot deny that is true. I don't have issue with the whole Church and it's like I know that different apostles at different times have said that if you have an issue with a part of the Church, then you have an issue with all of the Church. I just think this is one of those very misunderstood taboo gray areas and so I don't know that anybody has the answers.

The Mormon Church teaches black-and-white thinking; it is either all true or none of it is true. Some women challenge this aspect and separate out what parts they believe and what parts they question. Women, such as Quinn, who maintain a Mormon identity questioned the Church's teaching on homosexuality or Same-Sex Attraction, but maintained their overall belief that the Mormon religion is the one true religion on earth.

Aidan: Gradually though as I came to realize that I was not welcome as someone who is gay, I started to lose my belief. So now I'm in this odd position of yes I believe the Church, but no I don't believe it. So I believe that Thomas Monson is a prophet, but I also believe that he doesn't know the full story.

Mel: Because a lot of the things just don't make sense. And it's more the modern things that don't make sense. The core of it...all the stories of the book of Mormon, they make sense, I believe in that. Joseph Smith finding the golden tablets, that makes sense. I believe in that. But it kind of veered off course somewhere along the line of history where they forgot that they should be

teaching about love and acceptance and they went to teaching about how all these different things are wrong, but they can't say why.

For some women allowing themselves to question the Church's stance on same-sex sexuality opened up their ability to question other aspects of the religion.

Olivia: Not to use like the super Mormon analogy, but it's almost like a slippery slope. Like once I started down it, like I refused to let myself think about anything remotely against the Church's teaching for so long that once the idea, once I actually identified as a lesbian and realized that I am not going to have these things that they expect me to and then all of a sudden I was thinking if this part is not true, then what else is not true.

Women may critically examine their faith when their experiences with sexuality differed from how their religion told them they should experience sexuality.

Barbarella: I sort of thought that the first time that I did anything sexually with a woman that I would have some sort of guilt or something and that wasn't the case at all. It felt absolutely right. Absolutely right. And that just furthered all of my feelings or fueled all of my feelings that the Church was absolutely wrong. And if the Church was wrong about love, then the Church was wrong about everything.

Women who dis-identified with a Mormon identity questioned the entirety of the Church. Questioning the Mormon Church for some women occurred prior to questioning about their sexuality. Sexuality might not even factor when questioning religious identity. Heidi and Wendy had already rejected the Mormon identity prior to challenging their sexual identity.

Women questioned their beliefs and the doctrine of the Mormon Church for a variety of reasons, including, but not limited to, their experience with same-sex sexuality. Same-sex sexuality may be merely one more reason that they no longer felt committed to the religion. Jessica, who experienced sexuality as the primary motivating source in her decision to leave the Church, believes that she would have eventually left the Church

regardless of whether or not she experienced same-sex sexuality; she had begun questioning her religion and the Mormon faith prior to questioning her sexuality.

Another reason women question the doctrine of the Church is because the beliefs are incongruent with their experiences with people who did not identify as Mormon.

Some women saw hypocrisy in what the Church taught and how its members acted.

Heidi: And when I hit about 13, 14, I started to not like church as much. I started to see some incongruences...I was starting to see some of the hypocrisy. As far as I was starting to make friendships with people who weren't Mormon and I liked them. I didn't see why, they didn't look like satanic. They weren't going to consume my soul and they seemed really nice. I had friends who weren't Mormon and I had, they had parents that drank and they also seemed nice. In fact, they were a lot nicer than some of the Mormon parents that I knew.

Olivia: It's always been extremely frustrating to me because I know so many amazing people that lived their lives in amazing ways, but according to Church doctrine don't get to share the things that other amazing people do just because they don't believe this certain set of doctrines. And the conflict that ok even though Mormons don't really believe in the concept of hell and eternal damnation except for the really, really bad people, knowing that all these other really great people just didn't qualify for their version of eternity and paradise it made no sense to me and everything after that just kind of crumbled.

Some women questioned the Mormon Church because doctrine was not consistent with what they learned in school.

Wendy: I became interested in science. So it eventually devolved into being agnostic....Well so I was really getting into the science and like reading about evolution and...I was taking a lot of humanities classes and reading about creation myths and stuff. And so it kind of opened my mind that there's more than just this religion. And I started seeing that some of it kind of seemed silly. Because if you really think about the story of Joseph Smith, it seems really far-fetched. But before that, it had been perfectly normal and amazing. I couldn't believe that anyone else wouldn't believe it. It just seemed so clear.

The most common reasons that women questioned Mormon doctrine and practices related to social issues such as sexism, racism, and polygamy. While women questioned and had negative feelings towards the Church's stance on these issues, they

often did not divide women from the Church until their sexuality presented another unresolvable conflict.

Barbarella: I had issues with the Church. I had issues with polygamy. I had issues with...Blacks not having the Priesthood. I had issues with traditional patriarchy in general and how the Church is run. Yeah there are several issues I had with the Church but you, I mean you are sort of taught that that's your struggle, that's your battle, like that's what you have to deal with, that's what you have to overcome on this Earth and you get to sort of at some point reconcile it.

Already feeling some conflict, sexuality acted as a catalyst to critically examine their beliefs.

Parker: It was more than my sexuality...involved in my leaving the Church. It was definitely the catalyst. It was a very big part of it, but it was definitely a process of reevaluating beliefs that in my past seemed so beautiful to me but in the present I realized how manipulative and how controlling and how destructive they really, really are. I think they still are.

Kathryn: Actually that wasn't the first thing that made me start questioning the LDS Church, but it was yet another one...So my questioning of the Church actually started long before my realization that I was gay so in a way the two are two separate items. They certainly go hand in hand, but they are two separate items. So not all my problems with the LDS Church is about the fact that I'm gay. It certainly makes it so I will never go back, but I have issues with more than just that.

For Irene, the Church's involvement with the same-sex marriage initiative Prop 8, not her sexuality per se, acted as a catalyst. This event caused her to look at the Church differently and critically examine her own feelings. Irene, like Kathryn also recognizes that her religious and sexual identity development represent two different processes.

Irene: It's been painful because as I've come to recognize that I'm gay and also that I'm leaving the Church I look at it as two separate things. My family I knew would just wad it all together and oh my gosh it's because you, you're influenced by your friends and yada yada yada. But I see it as two separate things and I wasn't sure which one was going to be more painful to them...Because there's a definite conflict with the Church again even separate from the gay issue I just felt like there's no room to ask questions.

Women who stopped believing in the Church no longer had any desire to retain the Mormon identity now or in the future. Ellen recalls her reaction after talking to a woman who broke up the woman she loved and married a man even though she did truly love him because that is what she believed God wanted her to do.

Ellen: No loving God would do this. And so I just quit. Quit even thinking that the Church was something for me. And knowing that it would never be a place that I would be able to be myself.

Dis-identifying as Mormon meant more than merely no longer attending church. Women also had to consider whether they wanted their names to remain on the Church membership roles, formally counting them as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Several women also had to decide whether or not to continue wearing their garments, an outward symbol of their commitment to keep promises they made to live a certain type of lifestyle.

### Endowments

When women either serve a mission or get married in the Temple they go through a ceremony called an endowment. Considered a sacred ceremony performed in a Mormon Temple, women make covenants with God, such as sexual fidelity within heterosexual marriage, for the promise of God's spiritual blessings. The ceremony teaches about God's plan for men and women to join together in marriage in order to achieve personal exaltation.

Fourteen women took out their endowments, most as they prepared to go on a mission or to get married. Chris went through the Temple to prove to her mother and to

God that she would do anything to change. Andie came back to the Church after living many years in same-sex relationships because of her strong desire to go to the Temple.

Andie: I've always known in the back of mind that I had to go to the Temple. I needed to go to the Temple.

Because of the promises that women made in the temple, these women tended to feel more accountable to God for their same-sex relationships.

Stargays: My family's whole issue with being gay in the first place is that I've been through the Temple. I've taken endowments. Theoretically I know better and yet I still choose to live the life that I do and so for them I eternally lost. There is no hope for me. I'll never be recovered. I've broken all of my promises.

After this ceremony, women wear a religious garment considered to be sacred underneath their clothing. Wearing the garment is a symbol of the promises made in the Temple and a sign of one's commitment to live according to the standards of the Church. Many women choose not to wear the garment at this time in their lives because they do not want to misrepresent their activity or belief in the Church. Women who chose to stop wearing the garment did so after having sex with a woman, identifying as lesbian, or ending their participation in the Church. A few made the conscious decision to completely stop wearing garments when they engaged in a same-sex relationship. Taking off the garment is a large decision because it represents what they had formally believed.

Barbarella: I hadn't totally disregarded the Church at that point. And so I didn't know, I didn't know if I was just a Mormon taking off my garments or if I was somebody who was taking off the Church. And that wasn't yet clear to me. And so yeah I think that that was a big thing for me actually. But I couldn't wear them. I knew I couldn't wear them. So I didn't.

Others wore them less and less often or only wore them on certain occasions, like seeing family or attending church. For Irene, wearing the garments began to feel like a



uniform since she worked for the Church in a position that required her to hold a temple recommend.

Irene: I felt like I was disrespecting the covenants, true or not...But it was a conscious decision and it was painful because every day I was ugh. And I don't know if it was more painful taking them off or putting them on. Both ways it was just ugh why am I doing this. But honestly I felt like there was not a choice. I felt like there was not a, there wasn't a resolution to it. I have to put my garments on when I go and see my siblings. I have to put my garments on when I go to work. I have to take them off when I go out. I have to, so I felt, I don't know, but I didn't feel like there was a solution. So yeah, that's what I did.

Women who stopped wearing their garment do so because they believed it the honorable thing to do given their choices.

Kathryn: I was so sure that wasn't the life I wanted that it's to me it was almost like I respect this too much to keep pretending that I'm part of it. This is what my family believes. This is what essentially everybody I know believes. I don't want to disrespect it by wearing garments...to me that was a lack of integrity. I had to be more honest about that.

Mel never felt that garments meant to her what they were suppose to mean. She has always viewed them more as pajamas than as a sacred piece of clothing. After Rebecca ended her marriage and began a relationship with her female partner, she no longer considered the garments symbolic. She is contemplating taking them off, but has not yet because she does not want her children to question right now.

### Church Membership

Women who no longer identified as Mormon also had to decide whether or not to take their names off the Church records that officially counted them as a member of the Mormon faith. Removing a name from Church membership also signifies a loss of baptism and other spiritual promises. While most women who no longer identify as Mormon do not want their names on the membership list, only a few have officially

removed their names. Many reported that their parents factored into this because they believed it would hurt and devastate their families. Some suggested they might remove their names once their parents have passed away.

Parker, Holly, and Quinn no longer have their names on the membership roles of the Church. Parker asked that her name be removed because she had no intention of living the Mormon lifestyle any longer and removing her name was the honorable thing to do. Holly and her partner chose to take names off the membership records because they wanted to control the manner in which they left and not have to go through an ecclesiastical court. They have not told their families that they have taken this action.

Holly: We had made up our minds that we were going to be together and we were going to be out and open about it....Church or no Church that's what we were going to do. So we knew that we would face eventual court and we didn't want to do that, we didn't want to put ourselves through that anymore, any more than we had already been through. We had already been through hell. And we often say that we have been through hell and if we can make it through what we have been through to get together, we can make it through anything.

Quinn did not have her name removed by choice. The Church excommunicated her due to her same-sex relationship. The excommunication process included her bishop and other men in Church leadership holding an ecclesiastical court where they judged her behavior to deserve the Church discipline of losing her Church membership. They excommunicated Quinn because they believed this action would protect her young children from her gay lifestyle. While Quinn may still attend church, excommunication denies her the ability to practice fully in the religion.

Quinn I understand not going to the Temple and understand that, but really don't understand like if I wanted to make a donation whether it was tithing or some other donation to the Church really I can't do that. I can't pay tithing. I can't take the sacrament...and it's like how can they honestly tell me they are going to take my baptism away when that's an ordinance that's needed for eternal life you know what I mean. I don't feel like any man on earth has that authority. And maybe

that's me speaking out of turn, but I just don't think you can take someone's baptism away from them.

Parker and Holly felt empowered when they removed their names. Quinn felt traumatized by her experience.

### Relationship to the LDS Church

Woman had varying degrees of relationship to the Church at this time in their lives. Regardless of personal belief, all of the women had some connection to the Church either because their families actively practiced the religion or they lived in Mormon dominated communities.

Those who have relinquished their Mormon religion hold a wide range of feelings toward the Church. Some have anger toward it. Others moved through their anger and pain to be able to see the good the Church can do. Some feel ambivalent.

Olivia: And I can't definitely deny that it's all not true and that it's all terrible...like I'm comfortable saying that it's not for me, but I still can't necessarily say that it's not true. Burn it all. Go away. I don't want anything to do with it. Because it still is close to me. Not anywhere near where it was, but just almost as a sentimentally. It still means a lot to me even if I don't believe what it used to mean, I guess. I'm still confused about it myself.

Barbarella: I will say I still feel some defensiveness towards religion. Like when I hear other people speaking badly of all Mormons because my family is Mormon. It's like one of those things where you can talk bad about your dad but nobody else can. So I still feel that way. But I will trash talk it like nobody else.

Most women who maintained their religious identity believe that they will always be Mormon and cannot imagine not being Mormon. Many of these women, however, believe that the LDS Church focuses on the wrong issues. They believe that the Church should be more concerned about other social issues such as drug abuse, pornography, and poverty. Some women held out hope that the Church should change its position towards

sexuality minorities. Stargays has hope for evolution in belief and behavior. She believes that what sets the LDS Church apart from other churches is its belief in modern day revelation, which exists to fix things that are misunderstood.

Stargays: My personal opinion is that at some point, I don't know that we are going to have somebody stand up in conference one day and say it's totally okay you people can get married, have kids, and behave like the rest of us and we'll be totally okay with that. I don't know that that's ever going to happen at least not in my lifetime, but what I do believe is that the understanding of the Church, the growth of the Church and how it deals with homosexuality in general and the LGBT population and the men who lead the Church and their understanding of the situation I think is evolving. I don't think we're stuck in a situation where everything is doom and gloom and always will be...there have been a lot of things in the Church's history that at one point were okay that are not okay anymore. And my personal opinion, my firm belief is this is one of them. It's just taking a little longer, but I think we're not done yet.

There are also many who do not believe that the Church will ever change its stance on this issue.

Mel: At this point, I don't know that I can have [a relationship] with the Church. Because I don't think that they're going to change. I don't see that ever happening. That's part of their core beliefs in the Bible that this is wrong and that is wrong. And but I can't change how I feel either.

Although, women older than 40 have noted changes in their lifetime in the Church's treatment of same-sex sexuality.

Judi: I think that it's changed a lot since I was [college] age because it seems like it has drifted, and this is not satisfactory, but it does seem like it has drifted now towards you can be gay but you just can't have sex or have a family and we'll still accept you and everything. So it sort of looks like progress, but it's not nearly what it would need to be to be healthy for people. So I don't know. I wonder how it would be now if I was 15, if I would choose harder to stay in or not. I don't think I would.

### Spirituality

Stargays: Most people would say because you're gay, you've chosen to break away from God so therefore nothing you experience on a daily basis is from Him

so you can't possibly be a spiritual person, in-tune with anything in the universe and want to help anybody else out. And I have a hard time with that. I don't think that's at all what it means. So for me spirituality I think it's more about how you treat other people and about how you feel with the situation that you're in and...being okay with who you are at the time.

Spirituality is a separate construct from religiosity and religious beliefs. At the same time, women grew up believing they were two sides of the same coin. Only through the process of identity confusion and reconciliation did women begin to fully separate the two. Women in this sample tended to view spirituality as less strict than religion. Spirituality involves a personal relationship with God and other people, which is not dependent on a religious structure.

Aidan: Spirituality is that underlying feeling of connection with/between you and your idea of a Creator being. And it's also that underlying idea of connection between you and the world around you, nature, animals, plants, your family, your society, culture, your nationality...patriotism is a manifestation of spirituality in some ways. So spirituality is that underlying fluidness and the Church is the organization of it and the organizing that of the rituals and the organizing of the doctrine, it's the stabilization.

Samantha: Spirituality for me is your relationship with God or your higher power...I mean I don't do everything that I'm supposed to. I don't read my Scriptures. I don't pray, like I'm supposed to do. I do go to church every Sunday. I go to the Temple. And I try to be a good person and do what I'm supposed to do.

Spirituality remains tied to participation in the LDS Church for Samantha and Andie. Many women, like Rebecca, changed their belief that living according to the dictates of the LDS Church represented spirituality and allowed themselves to obtain the spiritual sense of well-being through other means, such as relationships. Because women enmeshed spirituality and religion for so long, some had difficulty untangling the two.

Barbarella: [Spirituality is] an issue for me because intrinsically I feel like the Mormon Church and spirituality are enmeshed and that there's no difference. I know a lot of people say that there's a difference between religion and spirituality, but I feel like in the Church there isn't. They are one and the same. And so I feel

like that's really suffered and something I haven't been able to sort of get back. And I do feel like that's really lacking in my life. And I don't know how to move forward yet with that. I've explored a couple of things, but very gingerly because usually it feels too much like religion...which I am no longer comfortable with. So it's I think probably a little more time to distance myself before I can kind of go back towards some sort of spiritual light I guess. But I do feel like it's a piece of me that's lacking and I want. I just, I can't do it yet.

Irene: Changing one's belief is not easy. I think for so long it's all been the same thing, your spirituality and your church attendance is one. And I have to get away from that because it's not. I don't believe that that's true. But you know if you're reading the Scriptures, saying your prayers, going to church, you're spiritual. But if you're not, you're not. And that's a black-and-white view and I don't think that that's accurate.

Quinn: I'm trying to hold onto my faith and spirituality and (my current partner) even said, 'I think your biggest challenge through this is going to be holding onto your faith. Not holding on to the Church, but holding onto your faith because you have been so betrayed by members of your religion'...faith in my Savior, faith and the things that I believe in. Faith in my testimony of the atonement those types of things.

Disconnecting from the Mormon Church and attempting to re-establish values and beliefs may be a difficult process. Having believing that their only option was to be Mormon, losing this identity and belief makes it difficult to take on a different religious identity. A Mormon identity can be all encompassing in one's life. Taking away that religious identity calls into question an entire worldview and perspective.

Parker: No I mean the process, my need to get out was affirmed over and over but still disconnecting was...you suddenly have to realize that everything that you believed is not true and how much of it isn't true and how much of it is and where are the lines and where are the boundaries and where is my value and where is my need to establish my own understanding, my own beliefs and that's wrong because I always learned that's wrong, but it isn't because you're clearly wrong and that whole. It's a battle. It's just I don't know. I do know, but I don't know how to say it in words. It was just really, really painful.

Some women struggled to give up religious beliefs that they have internalized and now find oppressive.

Barbarella: I think it was gradual when I first disconnected myself from the Church it was no problem for me to disconnect myself, but the beliefs they were still there in some ways, in terms of eternal life, like where I go after this is done, like those kinds of things. The image of God, the Mormon God, I could not get out of my head. I still cannot get out of my head....So I feel like there were a lot of things are really easy for me to move past because I felt like I wasn't given all the information anyhow. But just major things were difficult, like eternal life and that's a big one, where to go after and where was I before at this place because they provide an answer. And not many other people have as specific of an answer as the Mormon Church. And it wasn't comforting to me, but it was an answer.

Jessica: Like my mom has said to me and I had thought the same thing she's like, "Jessica I want you to be in heaven with us and you won't be." And the thought that I could potentially die alone like, I think I'm definitely still afraid that hierarchy of heaven and where you'll get put depending on how you've lived on earth. I'm definitely still afraid of that happening, which I'm sure is the case for a lot of people who have left the Church.

On the other hand, women may have difficulty holding onto any belief after losing their beliefs in the Mormon Church.

Ellen: The frame of reference that I had or the lens that I viewed religion in was strictly a Mormon theology and so after feeling like I could no longer believe in a Mormon theology, I also in my mind cannot believe in a God because there was no other lens to view a belief system for me and so I attributed God to a very negative belief or a negative feeling and that feeling was very much tied to and associated with the way I felt about my family and how they treated me. And so Mormonism and God were so connected and so were the way my family was treating me that I could not think about a belief or God as being true. But I started eventually thinking maybe feeling like okay maybe there is a God it's just not the God I was raised to believe in. But I never really fully developed that type of belief.

Even if they are able to give up their previous Mormon beliefs, many women have difficulty redefining what their beliefs are now.

Olivia: I would really like to answer that question in the future and figure out where to go from here beyond being an ex-Mormon queer girl who really likes being nice to people.

Some women will "experiment" with other religions. Women went to Buddhist, Muslim, Hinduism, Taoism, Shamanism, Paganism, and other Christian religious

services. All, except Lynn who found home in the Universalist Unitarian Church and Judi who identifies as Buddhist, could not fully connect to these other religious practices.

Kathryn: But as far as my beliefs I can't see myself as ever really been a part of an organized religion again because I think so much of that is somebody else's interpretation... I don't spend any time attending church, nor do I think I ever will. I don't read your religious books. Don't think I ever will. Just don't see myself as an actively religious person really ever again.

For some like, Holly, Barbarella, Irene, Ellen, and Heidi, religion feels like a captor where being able to step outside those bounds feels freeing. Wendy and Olivia consider themselves agnostic. Barbarella, Ellen, and Heidi consider themselves atheist. Parker states that she is in a healing stage from the trauma she experienced within the Mormon religion and cannot bring herself to believe in any religion; atheism is too much of a constructed belief for her at this time.

Some women have connected to individual spiritual paths not formally ritualized in a specific religious belief. Women found spirituality outside of religion, although not everyone desires to be spiritual. Several women stated that they do not consider themselves to be spiritual at this time. Other women find spirituality in different aspects of their lives. Aidan and Holly feel as though their careers that help and teach others represent their spiritual callings. Judi sees raising children as a daily spiritual experience. Women also experience spirituality by connecting with nature. Both Wendy and Heidi find science spiritual.

### Family

Identity formation, while a psychological process, is strongly influenced by environment. The families and communities in which women grew up greatly impacted



their experience with same-sex sexuality. Some women come from supportive families and some come from unhealthy/abusive families. Everyone, except Judi, came from families who practiced the Mormon religion. Many women came from large extended tight-knit Mormon families and this created greater pressure not to go against family beliefs. Contrarily, Judi joined the Mormon Church in part because it “pissed off” her parents.

Almost all of the women’s families raised them as Mormon from their childhood. Families had various levels of involvement within the Church ranging from a high activity level and following strict lifestyle standards to not attending church and allowing their daughters to choose their own level of participation in the religion without pressure or coercion.

Most women reported that their families greatly influenced their choice to try to hold on to their religious beliefs and remain faithful to the LDS Church. Because the lynchpin of Mormon doctrine is eternal families, women who experienced same-sex sexuality faced the threat of losing their families forever. Families often harshly reminded women of this belief. Some families specifically told women that they had to choose between them and living a “same-sex lifestyle.”

Ellen: The difficulty in reconciling my religion versus my, my love at the time for her was more about my conflict with my family.

Women wanted to please their families. They wanted to feel loved and accepted. Their choices often reflected this fact.

## Family Religiosity

Most women had highly active and staunch parents whose ancestry stemmed from the foundation or early years of the religion. These women described the Church as central to their families' lives. Their families held strict observance of religious practices such as praying together each day, holding weekly family home evening lessons, and attending all church services. As the Mormon Church is led exclusively by lay members called to serve in various positions, a few had fathers who held leadership responsibilities in the Church such as bishop, branch president, mission president, etc. Many women felt insulated and did not have exposure to people or activities not connected to their religion in some way. Almost all of the women's families held the expectation that these women would continue to practice the Mormon religion throughout their lives.

Holly: So I guess my belief in the Church was more out of that's what the family believes is, this is what my parents want me to do, and so I'm going to be a really good Mormon and be the best Mormon. A lot of people want their kid to be a doctor, well I was going to be a good Mormon. And I did. I went on a mission and everything else.

Several women did not have this type of insular family or pressure to be active in the religion in their youth. Some families who regularly attended services did not strictly follow all religious proscriptions and tended to be more lenient in their practices, such as buying food on Sundays (which strict Mormon households would consider breaking the Sabbath). Barbarella had some extended family that did not identify as Mormon and thus had exposure to non-Mormon beliefs and values. Daisy Jane, Stargays, Wendy, and Rebecca all had parents who did not actively participate in the religion in their childhoods. In these cases, grandparents often played a vital role in encouraging women to be active even though their parents did not attend church. Interestingly, both Daisy

Jane and Wendy's parents re-activated after these women became adults and thus became more religiously oriented at the same time as these women started acknowledging their same-sex sexuality. Stargays states that her mother and grandmother, despite being Mormon and introducing her to the faith, express almost anti-Mormon beliefs due to negative experiences that they had with the Church. Judi, in contrast, turned away from her family's religion (Catholicism) to join the Mormon religion on her own. To her family this seemed like a rejection of her Hispanic culture to practice what they perceived as a white religion.

### **Messages From Family**

Because most families actively practiced the Mormon religion, they implicitly sent the message that if one lives according to the Church, then she is a good person. If not, then she is a bad person. Most families viewed same-sex sexuality somewhere between an imperfection and a sin.

In their youth, many women's families did not discuss sexuality at all, let alone homosexuality. A few families had open discussions of sexuality from a young age; although more often than not, this did not include the discussion of same-sex sexuality. For most, if the topic did come up, it usually occurred in a negative reference especially during the initial development of the AIDS crisis. Despite not having overt discussions, messages seeped through.

Olivia: And it's not always intentional that they send these messages. Like most of the time people are trying to do their best, like I know my mother has always tried to raise me the best way that she can and give me as much inspiration as she can, but in the midst of that I've gotten the message that the way that I want to live my life is not approved and that I'm wrong some how even though I know

she would never directly judge me like that. I still very strongly have the inclination to not say anything because I don't want to be the one who is wrong.

### **Coming Out to Family**

Due to the negative messages women implicitly received about homosexuality, most women felt a reluctance to tell their families about their same-sex sexuality. Some women hid their attractions and even their first same-sex relationships from their family. Parker's mother asked her at 16 if she were gay. Parker knew that she could answer yes, but denied it to her mother. Andie came from a medical family who talked about sexuality, but upon recognizing her attractions to women she stated, "I was so afraid at that time that I never would have, no way would I dream of ever, ever bringing it up, Let alone telling my parents. No way." When Andie first accepted her sexuality and started dating other women, she continued to hide this fact from her family. Irene did not tell her family because they would be so disappointed that she felt it would be better for them not to know. Ellen continued to have a same-sex relationship as she let her parents continue to believe that it had ended.

Most women who hide their sexuality did so because they feared rejection. Part of the reason that Parker did not acknowledge her feelings to herself stemmed from her fear that she would lose her family. Most women, as they began to identify with their same-sex sexuality, no longer wanted to hide parts of their lives and pretend to be the ideal child their parents wanted. Olivia, at the time of her interview, felt compelled to come out to her mother because she does not want to hide herself due the toll it takes on their relationship. Olivia had yet been able to build up the courage to do so, despite this desire.

Olivia: So there's still that division for me trying to reconcile this is my life now and I'm comfortable with it, almost every aspect except when I have to go home and try to put back on the sweet Mormon girl face and do what is expected of me.

Most women did not feel able to talk to their families about their feelings given their families' judgment and strict perspective on this issue. They may try to warm their families up to their coming out by starting up conversations on topics that will eventually introduce the coming out conversation.

Women choose to come out to their family for a variety of reasons most often spurred by the desire to be honest. In Olivia's case, she does not want to spend her entire life pretending to be someone she is not. Nicole came out to her parents because they knew something was wrong and she did not want her parents to think she was using drugs. Other women, such as Wendy and Holly, came out to their families in order to order to obtain support due to difficult events co-occurring in their lives. Wendy feels that she came out before she was really ready. Barbarella felt compelled to come out almost immediately upon beginning her same-sex relationship because of the intensity of her feelings. Some women reported that they have better relationships with their family now since they came out because they are a more honest and genuine version of themselves.

Heidi: I'm actually closer with my family then I've probably ever been. And I think that also has to do with me feeling the most competent and comfortable with myself. So that helps. The older I feel that I get the more confident and comfortable I get with who I am.

Some women did not choose to come out to their family. Lynn and Stargays' families found out by discovering an email that exposed their same-sex sexuality. Stargays states she still would not be out to her family had they not discovered the fact. Andie's mother found out through rumor and Andie answered honestly when confronted

by her mother. Aidan did not officially come out to her family, but they surmised her sexuality based on her associates and the fact that she had a girlfriend.

Most women did not tend to sit their family down and announce their sexuality. Many come out gradually throughout different conversations. Most described allowing the information to come out in bits and pieces. Sometimes coming out went smoothly, most often women experienced conflict with some members of the family. Because members of the family responded in different ways, women often choose to selectively come out to members they believed would be most supportive. Sometimes women only had one family member, often a sibling or cousin, within whom they could confide.

Several women chose to tell only one parent, often the mother, and then would let their mothers make the disclosure to their fathers. A few chose to come out by letter or by email so that their family could process the information prior to responding. Irene first came out to one sister and then sent a letter to the rest of the family. Kathryn first came out to her sisters and with their support came out to her mother. Women may come out only to parts of the family. For example, they may tell the adults in the family and keep it a secret from the children or tell immediate family and not extended family.

Holly and her partner are out to her parents, but not to her partner's parents.

Holly: Well we haven't come out to them. I think they know. We just haven't formally voiced it. I mean they have been to our apartment. They know that we sleep in the same bed. I think they know everything, but they just don't want to talk about it. But they treat me nice and they're very kind to me, but I think her mother every now and then, except not so much so the last few years, but every now and then she'll bring up you know Lori coming to church and dropping things like maybe one day you'll meet a nice young man or something like that. Her dad just doesn't talk about it at all. He's not a member, but he's very, very conservative. But both of them very nice to me. I think they know, they just don't want to talk about it.

## Family Reactions

Parker: So the coming out process was interesting in two ways, all of this in hindsight so it's much easier to talk about now, but in some ways it verified the fear that I had and in other ways I saw parts of my family that were really beautiful and were really supportive and wonderful. So it was both.

Families' reaction to women coming out may not be what the women expected.

Nicole expected her mother to be more understanding and felt surprised at her father's supportive reaction. Some family expressed surprise and disbelief when women thought it should have been obvious to them. Andie, Parker, and Farah's mothers suspected their sexuality. Even though they suspected, the disclosure still produced shock. The disclosure can provoke fears that they will not have grandchildren or that they will not have this family member with them in their eternal family.

Farah: In that moment [my mother] was so disappointed in well what I later came to term as her thinking I had committed eternal suicide. In that moment, it wasn't that I killed myself in life, but as far as she was concerned she wouldn't have me for the eternities so I had just killed myself.

Not all families reacted negatively. Judi and Mel's immediate family did not have a problem with their sexuality. Olivia and Samantha have not come out to their families, but have theoretically considered the potential reaction. Olivia logically knows that her mother will support her, but still feels reluctant to come out due to the possibility of a negative response.

Olivia: Like all my friends know and love my mom and basically everyone is positive that she will be my number one pflag supporter. She's going to start my little support group and start waving flags and doing all these things. And everyone that knows me and knows my mother is just sure that there will be no repercussions. At least to talk to her, but I still can't bring myself to open my mouth and say it because it means disrupting the status quo and changing what has been established.

Samantha has not come out to her family, but she believes that she would receive a loving response.

Samantha: My parents are really cool people they would love me, they would, they would try to get me back on the right path you know they're not going to pull any punches, but they would still love me.

For women who have come out, most receive a mixed response. Some family members do not have a problem with the disclosure. Younger individuals and non-member or nonpracticing Mormons appeared more accepting. Some family placed their love for their family member above their religious convictions about the morality of same-sex sexuality.

Kathryn: My older sister she kind of took a deep breath and said, 'Well did you think that was going to change how much I love you?' You know and just was and has been that person from there on. Just I accept you for who you are. I love you. And just has never really, never really asked me about it. She has been very accepting of my partner. Just was really, really good. My other sister was not nearly as good. She said all the right things, but you can feel when it's not real.

Other family reiterated their love, even while expressing disappointment. Irene talks about her family's reaction in phases.

Irene: Phase 1 was...lots of love and lots of apologies and just empathy, sympathy I guess it's really. And then the next phase was also that what are you doing to find out that the Church is true? You need to get your testimony back. You've driven the spirit away. It's your fault. Come on, what are you doing? You know the steps to having the spirit with you and whatever.

Most women had to deal with tears and condemnation. A few family members cut off all communication.

Quinn: None of these things are going over very well. My family still has not accepted it...I have one sister who will actually talk to me about it. And my mom she just cries every time she talks about it and won't talk about it, has never asked me once about my current partner. And my dad won't talk to me at all.



In these negative situations, parents' responses included directing their daughters to talk to bishop and asking their daughter to pray about her attractions. Families told women that expressing sexuality is a choice. For evidence, they pointed to single or widowed heterosexual women who have also experienced loneliness and have lived their lives according to the Church standards. Chris' family hinted that she made this selfish choice so she did not have to spend money on children. A few women felt as though their family trivialized and invalidated their sexuality especially as they focused on the women's relationship to the Church.

Irene: I think I anticipated that they would be upset about me leaving the Church, but I didn't know that they would trivialize the same-sex attractions, sexuality side, which they have...I think I'm surprised at just how they've trivialized something that's bigger than the other, for me.

Most families tried to pressure women to live according to their Mormon beliefs. Families blamed a woman's same-sex sexuality on sexual abuse she may have experienced. They told these women that they she is lost, following Satan, and that same-sex behavior is evil. They did not consider having a same-sex relationship as a legitimate lifestyle.

Ellen: My brother who's four years older than myself he said that I wasn't welcome in his home and I couldn't see his kids anymore and those types of things. So I was really ostracized from his family and from his wife. And my, my mom tried to remain somewhat understanding, but always with the belief that I was sinning and able to change and if not marry a man at least be celibate type of things. And then my dad [is] very traditional minded, most of my family is, and he was outright disgusted I think by, by my sexuality.

Quinn: Oh I mean my family took me to lunch one time for 4 hours, gave me the Proclamation to the Family, told me that if they have to superglue my hands to the iron rod that they would, that there was no way they were going to let this happen, told me that she would never be welcomed in our family, that this was just a label, this isn't who you are, that this is just a chink in your armor that Satan is going to exploit. It is the only way that he can drag you down.

Holly: They equate my quote lifestyle is like someone who is a drug addict.

A few families asked their daughters not to come out to siblings or extended family members. Irene's family did not ask her to not come out to her nieces and nephews, but she does not plan on telling them and knows that the rest of her family will not tell the children. Some families went beyond simply asking these women not to come out. They also desire that the women to put on a façade to others that they are still active in the LDS Church. Jessica feels frustrated that her family asks her to continually perpetuate the image of active Mormon.

Coming out may be complicated by the additional revelation of a sexual relationship. Often times women's girlfriends had interacted with their family and sometimes had been treated like a family member. When the family realizes that a "friend" is more than a friend, then they no longer welcome that person despite the past relationship that they had with her. Families may refuse to allow that friend in the home or at family activities once they know the true relationship.

Even after coming out, talking about same-sex sexuality may be difficult with family. Farah experienced discussions with her father about beliefs and behavior as a debate, which she never felt she won; she eventually stopped having the conversations. Irene also avoids certain conversations stating, "I don't want intentionally disappoint them or hurt them and so I think I just avoid some of those confrontations." Mel views her family-in-law as avoiding certain topics because they know it will start conflict and neither they nor Mel want to get into a fight. Other women expected a negative response and surprisingly found more openness.

Some, however, never open up the conversations at all. Many did not want to talk with their family about negative events (past sexual abuse, current unhappiness, etc.) for concern that their family would either blame those events as causing their same-sex sexuality or believe that those events are consequences of the women acting on their same-sex sexuality. Even as women lived openly in their daily lives, they often did not discuss their feelings or experiences with their family. This caused women to feel unaccepted and not fully loved.

Aidan: [Sexuality is] not something I really talk to my family about and I really regret not being able to...I know my parents and my brothers and other relatives are seeing [my online postings about gay events/topics] but don't actually talk to me about it. It's really odd because it makes me feel like I'm not loved as much because if I was I can show everybody completely who I am.

Judi, on the other hand, feels accepted even though her family does not talk about her same-sex sexuality.

Judi: Because this is an extended Hispanic family, it's not something you talk about. So it's not really anything I've ever really talked about with them because I feel really accepted by them anyway. I mean I could, other than being a murderer and even if I was I think they'd still care, but it would be like bad form to talk about it.

### **Family and Mormon Church**

Kathryn: The LDS Church is always going to be part of my life because my family is all active.

Although half of this sample no longer identify as Mormon, most recognized the difficulty in ever fully separating from the Church given that they had families who still practiced the religion and remained active in the LDS Church. This means that their family's daily religious practices and significant family events centered around Mormon beliefs. This forces women to have some relationship with the Church as they still attend

family baptisms, missionary talks, funerals, and weddings. Some events, such as temple weddings, are restricted to Mormon members who are currently living all the standards of the Church and hold a temple recommend from their local ecclesiastical leader. This means women in a same-sex relationship cannot fully participate in certain ceremonial events.

Women such as Andie, Jessica, Wendy, and Chris have felt left out during these experiences. A few of these women told stories of watching all of their adult family members enter the temple to witness a marriage, while their families designated them as babysitters to nieces and nephews not old enough to enter the temple. Families assumed that these women will take the role because obviously they will not be attending the ceremony. This act in and of itself causes women to feel like outsiders within their family. Lynn has felt like an outcast because everyone in her family is Mormon. Chris' mother left her out of emails sent to family asking them to pray for a sick family member. Her mother believed that Chris might perceive being asked to pray negatively; instead, Chris feels excluded and important information about the family does not get disseminated to her.

A few women who have not been able to challenge their previous religious beliefs worry that their family may try to pull them back into the faith. They fear giving their family any leverage. While wanting to be honest about their sexuality, they do not want their family to know the extent they may still question their beliefs.

Irene: It's funny because when I first talked to my family, I don't want to give them any hope of what they want. I don't want them to have any hope, even if I have doubts. They can't know that I have doubts because I think that will be like a crack in the wall, suddenly they will be you know they'll find a way in.

Jessica: I could probably get like reconverted if they tried hard enough and that kind of scares me. I guess I'm scared of the Church and I am scared of becoming brainwashed, but then again I don't like to use the word brainwashed because I feel like that means my family are brainwashed. But I guess I'm kind of scared about what it represents. I guess I feel like if the last 6 years of coming out and discovering my identity has been a test like I've already in their eyes I failed it, but in my eyes I feel like I've you know I've gotten through the worst of it so if I turn back now and try and re-, like trying go back to go back to the faith or try and reestablish some kind of faith I feel like I'd be backsliding and I feel like I get more confused.

### **Distancing**

Because most families held negative views towards same-sex sexuality, women found themselves distanced from their family. The distance may be initiated by the families or by the women themselves. Families may not invite their daughter or sibling to family gatherings or may disinvite her partner. Some family members may completely stop talking to her.

Stargays: Their whole thinking is that, I'm sure you are familiar with the concept of eternal families and that kind of stuff within the Mormon Church right, well so if you're gay that obviously means that you're lost and so if you're lost then why waste time on you, kind of thing so. It's been very, very difficult trying to get even my own family to be accepting of that and to be okay with that and to not just write me off as well you know there you go. Just kind of on your way and we're not going to waste time on you anymore.

While women see their families as distancing from them, families have accused some women of isolating themselves because of the protective walls they put in place against the perceived rejection.

Parker: Most of my family is at least at the state of being kind. I'm still mostly cut off from them. It's not, they would not tell you that they have cut me off, but things have changed so drastically that it's, there's a definite isolation from the core family.

Women may purposefully distance themselves from their family. Some distance emotionally because of their internal conflict and concern about family conflict or due to

real conflict experienced in the family. Even if women attempt to maintain the connection to their family if they receive constant rejection, they will eventually distance due to the negative interactions.

Before women come out they may be ashamed of same-sex feelings or ashamed of lying to their family because they continued to pretend to participate and believe in the Mormon Church. The loss of connection or distance they feel with their family may stem from not fully being able to be oneself around family members.

Olivia: So it creates this weird dichotomy. It's not as intense as it was when I was living my entire life in two halves, but it is still, like it creates almost a distance, like I love my family and I'm very, very close to them, but I don't want to be around them as often because it is so exhausting to keep up the, yeah no of course I'm interested in men. I want to do churchy things. I love going to church and talking about Church things with you. It makes me so happy.

### **Family Affects on Same-Sex Relationships**

Families appeared to be a stronger predictor, even more than personal religious beliefs, for women choosing to remain in the Mormon Church and resist their sexual orientation and attractions. Women often felt as though they had to choose between their families and forming an intimate relationship with another woman. Several women literally experienced having to make the choice between their families and a same-sex relationship as their families told them that if they continued the relationship they would no longer be welcome in the family. Daisy Jane's mother told her that she would have to move away from the family if she continued her relationship.

Daisy Jane: I knew that I would lose my membership in the Church for what I was doing, but I was, and I was willing. I was fully engaging in the relationship and I knew that there would be consequences for that, but moving away from my family was too hard. So we broke up.

Initially, many women felt unable to give up their families for a romantic relationship. According to Mormon doctrine families have the potential to be together forever. Thus, women not only risked losing their families in this life, but forever. Women worried about how a same-sex relationship would affect their ability to be with their family eternally.

Chris: And my dad died when I was 5 so everything is hinged on that. If you ever want to see dad again, you better be celibate. And that, that right there has been the hardest thing in my life. The hardest thing in my life. If you want to see dad again, then you can't have love in your life basically. So every time I've had a girlfriend, I've literally thought I am making a decision here between my eternal family, nieces, nephews, dad, and this woman, whoever it would be at the time.

In the beginning, women appeared more reluctant to break ties with their family and attempted to conform to family expectations by breaking off the relationship or hiding it. What women are willing to give up or lose may change with time and experience. In general, women did not experience filial loyalty sufficient to compensate for the denial of a romantic relationship. Ellen, for example, went from hiding her first relationship and breaking up numerous times because of her family to no longer hiding and being willing to give up her relationship with her family if they did not accept her partner. Lynn says that she is willing not choose a relationship over her family and has reconciled to the fact that her family might ask her to not come home.

Thus, women consider their families when thinking about the possibility of even pursuing a same-sex relationship. Women do not want to hurt their families and recognize that their families might be hurt when they do not live the prescribed religious life. Both Irene and Nicole considered giving up their pursuit of a same-sex relationship because of the impact that it appeared to have on their family. Both realized such a choice would be self-destructive.

Family support may be the determinant of whether or not to pursue a relationship. Women may be concerned about losing their safety net and support network. Engaging in a same-sex relationship might mean that their families choose not to participate in significant life events, like weddings.

Aidan: It's becoming a big thing for me because it's something I am concerned about what happens if I and a woman actually decided to get married and have the ceremony, well there's all these people that wouldn't come or wouldn't even want me to announce to them that this is happening, like my parents. Everybody wants their parents and relatives and siblings and everybody at their wedding and that's never going to happen. They're never going to be supportive.

### **Family Acceptance**

Women desire and seek family acceptance. Many women participated in the Mormon religion in order to obtain that acceptance. Thus, engaging in behavior that limits one's standing in the Church has the potential to threaten family acceptance. While most families have to go through a period of reconciliation between their religious beliefs and their family member's sexuality, some families never wavered in their support.

Mel has always felt complete acceptance from her family. Wendy did not report any significant family conflict when she came out. Andie reports that her parents and siblings have been very supportive no matter what she has done. Andie's family has always treated her partners like family and even visited her and her partner in their home.

The women in this study view acceptance to mean not judging them, unconditionally loving them, and showing them this love. They did not equate unconditional love as approval of their same-sex sexuality. Most women did not feel unconditionally loved because of the same-sex sexuality.



Aidan: As much as my parents try to tell me that they love me, and they do, there's always this you love me, but you hate me being gay kind of thing.

Most women believed that their families placed conditions on their acceptance, whether their family implicitly implied or explicitly told women of the conditions. Often the conditions associated with living Church standards. In Irene's coming out letter, she points out the conditions of her family's love.

Irene: I just want you to love me unconditionally and I know that's not something that our family does. Everything has a condition. If you go to church, then you're righteous. If you don't go to church, you're a bad person. You know kind of this black and white everywhere.

Families may accept a woman's same-sex sexuality only as long as she does not engage in a same-sex relationship. Rebecca's family provided acceptance and supported her when she returned to her husband and gave up her same-sex relationship. Other families provide acceptance of women and their relationship only up to a point. Even as Ellen's family became more accepting her same-sex partner, they asked them to not be affectionate with one another in front of family members. Family acceptance may also divide between some members accepting and others rejecting the women.

Barbarella: My parents are still very conflicted. I think that they love me and that won't ever change and I know. I've never brought anyone home to them, but I do know that anybody I brought home they would accept and love. And although I still feel nervous about that, doing that someday. I know that it will be okay. All of my siblings have seen me with girls, but not my parents.

A family's level of acceptance changes over time and initially rejecting families may become more accepting as women become more confident in their identities and form long-term relationships. Chris went from seeking acceptance from her mother by living according to Mormon Church's standards to demanding acceptance for her sexual identity and same-sex relationships.

Acceptance is a process that grows as families interact with these women and their partners. It can take years. The women in this study tended to become more outspoken about their same-sex sexuality and established better boundaries with their family. Through family conflicts and difficult discussions, families either have to learn to reconcile with each other and heal their relationships or their family will remain divided due to beliefs and bitterness. In part, families need to let go of the expectations that they held for the women. Expectations they formed in her infancy. Farah's father told her that he felt like she had broken a contract with him.

Farah: And I said, dad when did I make that contract with you? Was it in the preexistence? Because I don't remember that. Was that when I was a baby and you adopted me? Because honestly how do you make a contract with a baby you adopt, other then I'm going to take care of you and be there for you. And I said, I felt that you broke your contract because you took me in and said you would take care of me, no matter who I was. Bless his heart after that he would introduce Lily as my companion.

Parker points to "critical support" that her family received in order to be as accepting as they are, such as her aunt who supported her mother in accepting Parker's sexuality. Sometimes increased acceptance simply comes with time as families realize that these women are not going to change and will continue to engage in same-sex relationships. Interacting with people who identity as LGB served to challenge some families' beliefs and perspectives of same-sex sexuality the most. After helping Wendy move and meeting her LGBT friends in the process, Wendy's dad saw that "gay people are as supportive and fabulous as straight people can be." Seeing women in loving same-sex relationships also helped challenge stereotypes and incorrect beliefs families' may hold about same-sex relationships. Farah's family finally accepted her relationship as they saw her partner comfort her in her grief at the death of her mother. Recently, Holly

visited her family for the first time in several years after officially coming out as being with her partner.

Holly: Lori and I tried to just be ourselves you know and we've never been overly PDA in front of people and so I think my family has this view of the LGBT people that they're just sex people, everything's sex, sex, sex. So I think it was really helpful for them to see us just be the same way we were and actually it turned out to be a fairly nice as far as that part.

Families as a whole appear to eventually provide reluctant acceptance of a woman's same-sex sexuality. However, acceptance for a woman's choice of romantic partners is different than acceptance towards her religious choices. Even when women dis-identify with the Mormon religion, they continued to respect their family and the religion to some extent. Their families did not necessarily give them the same courtesy. Jessica respects her family and family's beliefs, but believes that she does not get the same respect for her choices and beliefs. Several families could accept a woman's same-sex sexuality more than they could accept her not being part of the LDS Church.

Parker: And to this day I think it is more difficult for my family that I'm not in the Church than it is that I'm gay. I know it is for my nieces and nephews. I know they don't care that I'm gay. They're actually who cares. And but it troubles them especially because a lot of them are in that space where they're going on missions and coming back from missions and they are really troubled by their aunt Parker not being part of all of this that's very important to them.

Chris: I drink coffee like crazy. And [my mom] told me once that she would rather, she told me, 'I'm ok with you being gay, but don't drink coffee.' (laughs) Which cracks me up...it's finally dawned on her that it's not a choice to be gay, but she'll be like it's a choice to drink coffee. So it's kind of funny.

Changing or challenging beliefs about same-sex sexuality is difficult because it requires family members to examine their own faith.

Quinn: No one wants to re-examine their faith in my family because for my mom to re-examine her faith it would mean that she stood on the wrong side of the line with [other family members who have also experienced same-sex sexuality]. And

so that's a difficult thing for her, but I'm her daughter so it's causing her to and it's painful for her.

Families can, if they allow themselves, accept their LGB family members without having to give up their religion or compromise their beliefs. Despite the pain, families can heal and grow stronger. Relationships strained or broken due to negative interactions can mend. Several women noted how their parents have changed in ways that they never expected when they began their journey.

Kathryn: I always say that you know the way to change someone's opinion is one relationship at a time...like 20 years ago someone could have said to my mom 'I have a gay daughter' and she'd be like 'oh that's horrible.' Now they say it, 'oh make sure you accept her. Make sure you don't drive her into depression.' She would have a totally different perspective on it.

## Mothers

Motherhood represents a significant role in the Mormon religion. Mothers supposedly have closer relationships to their children because of the religious imperative that they be full-time homemakers. It appeared that most women came from families who held traditional gender roles. Heidi's mother represented the glue that held their family to the Church. Having her mother become inactive allowed Heidi to question the Church when she was still young.

Most women had close and healthy relationships with their mothers; several did not. Parker challenged her mother because she did not represent ideal femininity. Samantha did not have an affectionate relationship with her mother and has recognized a pattern of seeking out that mother figure in other women.

Coming out was difficult for many women. A few mothers suspected their daughters' sexuality before their daughters even acknowledged it and sometimes asked

them outright. Many women stated that they had a sense that their mothers knew even though they did not want to know. Aidan's mother put her name on the Mormon Temple prayer role because she knew that Aidan had emotional issues related to her sexuality, but she did not know exactly what issues.

Mother had various reactions to their daughter's coming out. Some mother responded with love and some responded negatively. Barbarella describes coming out to her mother.

Barbarella: It was really, really scary because there was a chance that that she would just totally disregard me. But she didn't...I told her that I was in love with someone and I think that the first thing out of her mouth was that she was happy that I was able to experience love, which was a very nice thing for her to say.

Although Andie's mother initially asked her to leave the family house upon discovery of her same-sex relationship, Andie has always felt accepted by her mother. Her mother encouraged her to continue to cultivate her relationship with God regardless of her relationship status.

Andie: She was always just loving and she just said to me, she said, 'I'll love you no matter what. I just want you to be happy with your life. And if you can stay close to, stay close to Heavenly Father and just be the best person you can possibly be'.

Not all mothers exemplified compassion and acceptance. Most mothers appeared to struggle with their beliefs and their daughters' sexuality. Many mothers reacted very negatively at first or only accepted their daughter if she intended to remain single. A few women had close relationships with their mother and coming out estranged that relationship.

Nicole: We're very close, she's one of my best friends...sometimes I wish, well now I kind of wish that we weren't because I don't have a lot of support from other people right now and I wish I could just go to her and tell her all these exciting things...she said, 'I don't want anything to do with it.' And that broke my

heart. I just wish I could share this joy with her and have her be happy for me at the same time.

Although Chris' mother encouraged her for years to remain in the LDS Church, she stopped pressuring Chris when she realized this made Chris suicidal. Regardless of beliefs, mothers stated that they would rather have their daughters alive and identifying as a sexual minority, than commit suicide.

Kathryn: I think that that [going to the hospital after my suicide attempt] cemented it for mother. It's like okay no I don't want you going down that road again. Okay you're gay, okay. So I think, I think that helped. But it opened a door for the two of us to have an honest relationship obviously and we've never been closer. So over the years we just kept getting closer and closer. As I became more comfortable with me, she worked right along with me.

Mothers, some more than others, especially appeared to strive toward greater understanding and acceptance of their daughters. Most mothers actively tried to be more open-minded as their understanding of sexuality progressed with their daughters'.

Parker: It is one thing about my mom, she's got her beliefs and her place and I've challenged that. And in all fairness to her, even though there still is difficulty, she really does try to understand. She doesn't just shut the door and say there's no understanding. She grows in steps and it's kind of interesting to watch that in her because if you had interviewed me 6 years ago I would have said she never would be open to it, but she makes her own progressive steps.

## Fathers

Fathers varied in their personality style and their interaction with their daughters. Some fathers appeared domineering, dismissive, and critical. Other fathers had an inherent kindness and sometimes responded more compassionately than the women's mothers. Many fathers actively participated in the LDS Church in the women's youth; however, a few did not attend church or may not have lived some of the lifestyle standards, such as choosing to drink or smoke. Almost all of the women come from two-

parent households. Stargays biological father practically disappeared from her life after he and her mother divorced. She views her mother's second husband as "one of the most nasty creatures on the face of the planet" due to abuse he inflicted on her. Chris and Kathryn's fathers passed away when they were young. This complicated the process of identity reconciliation due to concern about not being able to see their dad again if they did not follow Church standards.

Several fathers had very negative reactions to their daughter's sexuality. Barbarella's father traumatized her in his response. Ellen and Jessica's fathers reacted in disgust toward their sexual orientation. Some fathers will not talk to their daughters at all about their sexuality or relationships. A few fathers expressed their belief and hope that their daughter's lesbianism would be a passing phase.

Not all fathers responded in hurtful manners. Heidi felt scared coming out to her dad, but he responded with love. Andie described her father as understanding same-sex sexuality because "he had been a bishop before and had worked with people who had struggled with it and he's had a real sensitivity...and he knows what a crisis it can be in somebody's life." Farah and Nicole stated that their fathers maintained the connection to them when their mothers withdrew.

Farah: My mom just couldn't be under the same roof with me. Bless my dad's heart, he had not ever been the one who was more connected to me, it was my mom, but he stepped forward and would check in on us and be the one that kept tabs.

## Siblings

Siblings could either be a woman's greatest support or her worst critic. Women may feel less pressure to tell their siblings than they did their parents. Some women first

felt comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation to a sibling prior to coming out to the rest of the family. Some siblings had no conflict whatsoever with the disclosure. Others reacted warmly, but had to process their own feelings before accepting.

Kathryn: [My sister stated that] she was going to have to think long and hard about this and really change her thinking because as far as she was concerned gay wasn't real. It was a choice and that she was really going to have the search herself to accept.

Stargays has a brother with whom she used to be close, but now they are not.

Other siblings will not discuss sexuality with them. Siblings who have young children may feel concerned about their sister exposing their children to sexual diversity. Several siblings suggested they needed to limit their children's contact with their sister. Irene's family has said:

Irene: ... 'You know Irene we love you, you're ours, your ours forever, and we will never stop loving you, but you know the time may come that we're going to have to limit our exposure because of the kids.' I am like that is so rude because that's the thing that keeps me. I don't care if I never see my siblings again, but don't keep those little monkeys away.

Quite a few women had an older brother who reacted with extreme negativity. A few women hold brothers who completely cut off contact. In Parker's case, her brother cut off the entire extended family because he felt they provided too much acceptance to Parker and her partnership. Ellen's brother, who initially told her that she could never see her nephew again, actually attended her wedding reception because after deep consideration he realized that her love was no different from the love he felt for his wife.



## Children

Daisy Jane, Quinn, Parker, Rebecca, Judi, Samantha, Mel, and Heidi all have children. Farah helps in raising her partner's daughter from a previous relationship. Ellen is actively planning for her wife to get pregnant within a year.

Because of the negative messages that women internalized about same-sex sexuality, Daisy Jane and Rebecca at one point considered themselves unworthy to care for their children. Daisy Jane left her children with her husband when they divorced because she believed that her same-sex sexuality represented a mental illness that made her unfit to be a parent. Rebecca too left her children when she ran away with the woman that she loved because she thought they would be better off without her. However, because of the belief that she had to choose between her children and the woman she loved, she choose to return to her husband in order to be with her children. Both of these women realized, as they grew to accept themselves and their sexuality, that they could provide excellent parenting regardless of their sexual orientation. Although, Daisy Jane's family continues to believe that she should send her children away if she does form a same-sex relationship. At the time of the interview, Daisy Jane did not know what to think about that.

Rebecca: I just try to make sure I put my children and then I try to make sure I put my personal needs so that I can be a healthy balanced person for them. You know and I don't see where my sexual orientation has anything to do with a child's welfare if I'm not putting them in a situation that would threaten who they are. Does that make sense? I think they're fine. They'll be fine. They'll grow up to be well-rounded people able to accept diversity.

As women made the decision whether or not they wanted to actively participate in the Mormon Church, they had to decide whether or not to allow their children to continue

to participate. Women saw the decision as one that should not be forced on another like their family tried to force on them. They did not believe that they should make this choice for their children. When Parker removed her name from the membership records of the Church, she left her daughter's name on.

Parker: I didn't take Tessa's name off the Church because I feel like that's her business, that's her choice....She chooses not to go. She makes a very conscious choice. She's, I think, torn. I think it's helpful for her to have that identity in a world where that so permeates everything. But on the other hand she has no connection to the beliefs, more the cultural identity than the beliefs, and that's ok she's 14 and she has her whole life to construct and create. I didn't think it was my place to decide that for her. It's something that's kind of a connection between her and her dad and I'm not going to go cutting down all of those things for her. So technically she's still a member.

Daisy Jane: I want to respect whatever they want their relationship to be in the Church. Because of my experience, I feel like that is such an individual choice.

These mothers did not want to negatively affect their children beliefs and did not want to sway their children due to their decisions of whether or not to be active in the Church. Both Quinn's and Rebecca's ex-husbands have custody of their children on Sundays and have the responsibility of taking the children to church if they choose to do so. Samantha wants her son to be actively involved in the Church and to hold her same beliefs, but allows him the choice not to attend church with her.

Farah states that they allow her partner's daughter to make her own decisions and determine her own level of involvement with the LDS Church. Judi had her son baptized Catholic for her family, but allows her son to make his own decisions regarding religion. Mel wants to give her daughter sufficient information to make the choice for herself when she is older.

Mel: I tell her it doesn't matter who you are or what you are, I love you. And if someone doesn't love you than you don't need to worry about them because I love you that much more. So we cover like, she pays tithing that like 3 pennies a

month kind of a deal. And she goes to church with her dad and she learns about Jesus and heaven and all those things, but then I tell her at home if two boys are kissing there's nothing wrong with that. If two girls are kissing, there's nothing wrong with that. They still feel the same love that I feel for you. You know and it just doesn't matter. So it's kind of one of those where she hears both sides. And when she grows up, she can decide for herself.

Children want to support their mothers. If their mothers leave the Church or are excommunicated, they too have to decide whether or not they want to be members. Just as women feel as though they have to choose between the Church and an intimate relationship and their families struggle with choosing between their religious beliefs and the women in this study, children may believe that they too must choose between the Church and their relationship with their mother.

Quinn: [My oldest daughter] actually said she didn't want to be a member of the Church anymore. I said oh honey it's not an either/or. You don't need to make that choice. You can still love me and still be a member of the Church. It's okay. You don't need to decide oh I don't want to be a member and I can't be a member if I'm going to love you. And that's what I'm trying to explain to my family, it's not an either/or. It is not the Church or me, you can still have the Church and me.

Because extended family members tend to be active Mormons, children inherit the conflict between the Mormon religion and their mother's sexuality to some extent.

Farah: [My partner's] whole family is LDS and she feels it's very important for [her daughter] to be connected to her cousins. And it is, but some of the family members are very anti-gay. And so [her daughter] is in a precarious situation sometimes dealing with family issues.

Most women do not appear to be concerned about sexual stigma and do not worry that their sexuality or same-sex relationship will harm their children. Some feel concerned, however, about how a heterosexist society will treat their children.

Parker: I worry about Tessa. I worry about the impact it has on her life and the challenges that that creates for her and her life. I do very much worry about that. But I don't worry about it in a state of oh this is wrong and I should change it. I worry about it as a I'm sorry that you have to face a culture that can't understand this dynamic and I'm sorry about that.

Daisy Jane actively tries to change the atmosphere of homophobia prevalent in many Mormon wards.

Daisy Jane: We've talked about it occasionally....So what I'm trying to teach them is to respect anyone's choices and it's important at church that we always welcome and be kind and friendly to everyone who is there because we're all in different circumstances and situations and it's important for me to demonstrate to them that I feel like I belong in church if I want to be there. Because I believe that the message that is sent that if you are gay, that you don't belong in a Mormon church. And to me if I want to be there then, then I should be welcomed there. So that's something I want them to know and understand and that I'm not embarrassed and that I'm not trying to hide.

#### Children's Fathers

Judi is the only woman to have her child while in a lesbian relationship. All the other women had their children with men. Both Heidi and Mel are currently raising children in healthy heterosexual partnerships. The other four women have divorced their male partners and three are raising their children with their same-sex partner. Samantha, the only single parent, does not want to enter into any other partnership until her son is an adult.

Two ex-husbands' attempted to collaborate and maintain a positive enough relationship in order to jointly raise their children.

Rebecca: We just explained that better that we be a part, that we're not getting along so well and that it just would be better for them so they're not seeing us fighting...you don't want to go in there and tell them that you don't love their father anymore because...they think maybe they won't love me anymore...So it's been hard on the kids and kind of stressful for me and him, but we're working it out we're being calm with the kids and we're trying to have a mutual relationship so that we can be a peaceful relationship so we can be the healthiest thing for our children.

Parker: [My ex-husband] would go to dinner with us [Parker, her girlfriend, and her daughter] and movies so that Tessa had a stable and supportive environment

across all the adults that were in her life, which was really brave and kind of him to do.

Daisy Jane's ex-husband tried to alienate her children against her. The other two men either alienated their children from them or basically disappeared from their children's lives.

Quinn: I mean most men when they get divorced get very self-centered, not all, but a lot of them. And [my ex-husband] definitely falls into that category where it's all about him. And he told my oldest you're the mom now. You don't have a mom when you're here. I'm like she always has a mom even when she's there. It doesn't matter. She always has a mom. She's 10 years old. She doesn't need to be the mom. But there's definitely been some pain there.

### Community

Community includes extended family, neighbors, friends, and fellow Church members with whom women associate on a regular basis. Many women in this study grew up in insular Mormon environments, whether in predominantly Mormon neighborhoods of Utah and Idaho or due to restrictions their families placed on their households to prevent outside influence. Only a few women knew family members or other community members not of the Mormon faith and had exposure to other types of lifestyles and beliefs. The community in which their families raised them created the backdrop to their unfolding experience with same-sex sexuality. Geographic culture (examples being Utah culture, Southern culture, or rural culture) also influenced the community beyond religious culture and needs to be taken into consideration.

## **Mormon Community**

Mormon communities exist throughout the world wherever the Mormon Church is established. Family and extended family might all identify as Mormon. Peers, neighbors, and community members might all identify as Mormon in some areas of Utah and Idaho; however, one need not live in these states to be surrounded by a Mormon community. Families who live outside of Mormon-dominated regions can create an almost exclusively Mormon community by choosing to interact socially only with family and other members of their faith. Families built Mormon communities wherever they lived by participating only in Mormon associated activities and allowing access only to certain books and media deemed appropriate.

In addition to the family environment, peers significantly influenced women's experiences and choices. A few had friendships with non-Mormon peers. Many did not either because of choice or geographical location in a predominantly Mormon area. Several women attended church, weekday religious classes, or Mormon-sponsored activities in their youth because of social expectations from peers. Mormon peers often reinforced the Church's values regarding sexuality causing women few safe friendships in which she could discuss her experience. Friends may share a variety of negative messages about homosexuality. On the other hand, Barbarella did not have any peers who shared her faith, but she believes this helped her not to be destructively attached to the religion. Jessica believes that had her family not moved to Utah she would have questioned the Church sooner because of non-Mormon friends who challenged her to think critically.

Beyond family and peers, the general Mormon community creates a heteronormative culture with a subsequent emphasis on family, meaning heterosexual marriage and children. Failing to meet the expectations of the Mormon culture induces much of the conflict women experience as they try to understand the meaning of their same-sex sexuality without any community supports. They feel isolated and alone in a tight-knit community that may reject them if they deviate outside the belief system.

Olivia: I used to have more faith, a lot more faith than I do, but I never felt like my ward was home. Like I loved the people, they were very nice, they were really caring, and when you are in Young Women's you're expected, like this is what you are being told to do. You're going to come to meetings on Tuesdays and your going to learn about marriage and we're going to try on temple dresses and just being excluded by not even, they didn't realize that they were doing it. I'm sure all of my young women leaders cared so much about me and never meant to hurt me, but I felt so distanced at the same time. Like I wanted to badly to be part of the happy community that never questioned anything.

Parker: I don't think the Mormon culture realizes how much they cut people up. I don't think they have a clue about [it] because they're in their little microcosm and they don't feel the, the exclusion and the isolation.

The Mormon community, like all communities, changes throughout generations. The era in which one grew up in the Church created a different backdrop in regards to the sentiments about same-sex sexuality. Older women remembered when the Church taught and considered same-sex feelings an abomination. Younger generations grew up with the message that attraction in and of itself is not a sin, only same-sex behavior. Aidan remembers being raised in the era when the LDS Church excommunicated a number of publically visible intellectuals and feminists. This event led her to believe that she could not express parts of herself safely because of threatened punishment.

Most women reported that the Mormon community as a whole did not talk about same-sex sexuality. Women understood the message that their community viewed same-

sex sexuality as evil and a taboo topic. Women felt pressure to conform to gender role expectations. They learned shame from the community and many worried about other people's judgments of them.

The cultural environment, while shaped by the community's religious beliefs, does not equate to religious doctrine. Stargays points out the difference between doctrine of the Church and people's interpretation of it.

Stargays: There is a lot of ignorance out there, but ignorance because of people's interpretation not because that's the way the Mormon Church actually is.

#### Utah Mormon Community

The Utah Mormon community, which extends into some parts of Idaho, is different from Mormon communities outside of these states due to cultural difference in geographical areas. Utah Mormon represents a unique culture within the religion due to the history of the Church's pioneers and settling of the state. Utah culture adds an additional layer of pressure to conform to social norms due to the domination of the Mormon religion in the socio-political landscape. Mormon values and beliefs seep into every aspect of someone's life. A few women noted a repressive nature in Utah.

Women did not experience diversity and Mormons ostracized non-Mormons.

Daisy Jane: I am growing up in Utah valley, the center of Mormon, the Mormon metropolis, and so how can that culture not, how can I not be aware of that.

Mel: I went to seminary mostly because it's Utah and if you didn't attend seminary, then there's something wrong with you. And I had the good grades in all my other classes so I didn't like, I couldn't use the excuse well if I don't take a regular class I'm going to fail and I won't graduate. So I just kind of didn't have an excuse not to take it.

Wendy: Because I have met a lot of people, they're Mormons in other States and they're a lot different than the Mormons I know here. I mean because civic life



centers around the Church too. In my high school, seminary graduation was as big of a deal as high school graduation.

Barbarella and Jessica experienced culture shock when they moved to Utah.

Barbarella: It was weird coming to Utah and experiencing my religion in a very different way. And it was really offensive to me actually....It's just very culturally different.

Jessica: I was grappling with my religion which I had been struggling with ever since we moved back because the Mormon faith outside of Utah is very different from the Mormon faith inside of Utah. Here is very much like very, it almost seems cult-like here. And outside of Utah it seems much more like I don't know people aren't as not as, they don't pursue you as much so they're not as like, it's not so much of your identity. At least that's what it seemed to me outside of the State. So I was not really fitting in at church or at school.

Utah is not a monolithic culture. There are pockets of diversity in larger cities. A couple of women noted living in a rural area influenced community thought and behavior as much as the Mormon religion.

Lynn: I think that growing up gay even outside of the Mormon Church would have been difficult in Southeast Idaho. So growing up gay in a rural area is going to be difficult anywhere.

The Mormon Church permeates throughout all part of the State of Utah, rural and urban. Even if one leaves the Mormon Church, it has the ability to influence daily life due to the strength of Mormon socio-political reach in Utah. Stargays felt relief from negative mental health symptoms when living outside of Utah because of the greater acceptance of diversity in city in which she now resides. It can be difficult to live in Utah when one experiences same-sex sexuality. It is especially difficult trying to figure out one's identity amidst the negative messages disseminated throughout the culture.

Ellen: The Utah culture as a whole is very, very difficult culture to grow up in as a gay person until you are able to just kind of ignore or block out the way that they view you and not allow their projected disgust and hatred effect the self confidence and comfort that you have in yourself.

The cultural environment also impacts women's relationships. Chris finds it harder to find someone to date who shares her values outside of Utah. The cultural pressures, however, make living in a same-sex relationship more difficult. Holly states that it would have been harder to come out had she and her partner lived in Utah or continued to live the South.

Andie: But living in Utah definitely has an impact. It was much easier being in a relationship if you moved away and been away a lot. It is much easier being in a relationship outside of Utah than it is inside of Utah.

### Ward Community

A ward community consists of the Mormon neighbors who attend weekly Sunday services together. The LDS Church designates wards through geographic divisions and assigns areas to specific ward houses and meeting times. A ward provides more than individuals with whom to worship once a week. A ward creates a tight-knit group of individuals who volunteer their time, skills, and money to serving other people in the ward area.

Although the same doctrine is taught in every Mormon Church throughout the entire world because of established teaching curriculum, not every ward is the same. The people who create wards also create a unique culture in this worldwide religion.

Although no congregations can be an officially "welcoming" church, some wards consist of people who hold more accepting attitudes of same-sex sexuality.

Aidan: They have told me we love you the way you are and if this is the way you are. We can't judge...it's your path to God that you have to worry about and we can't worry about yours we're too busy trying to have our own with God.

Wards in more liberal states or near bastions of liberalism, like some universities or segments with a large young adult population, appeared less condemning and more accepting. Barbarella and Lynn found themselves in wards outside of Utah with liberal members and this created an environment in which they felt comfortable enough to continue to participate in the religious community. Only a few women experienced this type of accepting ward community. Most felt unaccepted in their ward communities.

Olivia: Especially the people in my home ward. Maybe an ideal ward that I could create, craft for myself. That could be great. But the people I've been given, as much as I love them and as wonderful as they are I don't think I could be myself comfortably around them

Women reported that they perceived Utah and Idaho wards tend to be more conservative in their rhetoric and represented by stereotypical Mormon families. This does not mean that wards in Utah do not have the potential to create an accepting environment. Andie currently resides in the same Utah ward where she grew up. She states that no one ever treated her differently or looked at her funny despite many members' knowledge of her same-sex sexuality. Utah and Idaho wards are heavily influenced by the shared culture of the religious members in those Mormon-dominated geographical regions. Experiencing discrepancies between different ward congregations may produce a different feeling in church, despite being taught the same religious doctrine. Jessica experienced disconnect after moving from a ward in Asia to a Utah ward.

Jessica: It's your typical Draper white bread ward with a million babies and lots of families and I never really found friends there even though my, the same girls in my Sunday school class and young women's were all going to my same school. They never really talked to me. And I remember saying early on to my mom. I said it doesn't feel the same here. It doesn't feel the same. And she's like of course it's the same, the spirit is the same everywhere. And I couldn't really tell

her like I'm not really feeling the spirit here. I just was not feeling, I didn't feel a connection with anybody...I didn't really feel connected to the Church anymore.

Lynn considered remaining in the Church while attending a ward with more liberal members who did not feel disgust with same-sex sexuality. When she moved into a new ward in the Midwest that hammered family, children, and the evilness of same-sex sexuality, she could no longer participate in a religion that made her feel so bad about herself. The Church community made all the difference in her decision of whether or not to continue to practice the religion.

Lynn: And so at that point in [the Northeast] I was like okay if churches outside of Idaho and Utah are more liberal like this then maybe I can stand being a Mormon even if I don't believe everything that they teach. I can still be involved. I can still be active and try to gain whatever benefit I can from it. And so in [the Northeast] even though I didn't believe everything fully I still planned on being Mormon, until I came to [the Midwest] and went to church here and then decided I'd had enough and then I was done.

Community includes the religious community, but also extends to school and work. The religious community has a tendency to become more enmeshed with other aspects of life in Utah because of the sheer proportion of individuals who identify as Mormon. Church owned Universities companies and businesses owned or managed by Mormons can create additional pressure to conform to a Mormon lifestyle.

## BYU

Chris, Daisy Jane, Farah, Holly, Judi, Lynn, Quinn, and Barbarella all attended BYU or participated in a BYU study program. BYU is the Church owned and operated University system. Attending to BYU places one in a concentration of Mormons who are committed enough to the religion to attend a religious school. To attend BYU, all students must sign an Honor Code that states that they will not engage in sexual behavior

outside of marriage. Breaking the honor code results in disciplinary action by the University, up to and including expulsion. With a college diploma also on the line, women had another institution inducing them to conform to a Mormon lifestyle. Most women, if they had recognized their same-sex attractions during their time at the school, either hid the attractions and same-sex relationships or actively tried to change their orientation. A couple of women experienced the school's disciplinary process, which is separate from the Church's disciplinary process.

Daisy Jane: I guess BYU's reaction was for me to, to go through a process where I met with the Honor Code office once a week and was in therapy at LDS Social Services a couple of times a week and more or less it was to try, the goal of the therapy and the Honors Code office it was to try to remove those feelings from me. And they used different therapy tactics and so essentially the conclusion that I came to is that I just needed to try to block them out, push them, suppress them and that was what was going to make everyone happy.

## Work

A few women also worked for the LDS Church in their adult lives. Working for the Church often meant the requirement to hold a temple recommend, a symbol of living according to the standards of the Church. Women who worked for the LDS Church had additional reason to remain closeted because coming out would threaten their job. This is not to say the only conflict women experienced when working for a Church organization came from their sexuality. Stargays, the only woman in her department, felt outcast because of her gender. One also need not work for the LDS Church to work for an employer who held strong Mormon beliefs. Kathryn worked for a private company in Utah whose owners practiced the Mormon religion. Kathryn held a lot of clout with the executive team, until another female employee accused her of sexual harassment.

Although the accusation was unfounded, she lost management favor when they found out her sexual orientation. They connected being gay to inappropriateness with her employees. After this incident, she had to find a new job. Understandably, women may feel the need to hide their sexual orientation at work and not challenge others homophobic comments due to fear of reprisal, especially if working for the Church or for a company heavily influenced by the religion. Other work places also felt unsafe. Quinn does not feel comfortable coming out in a non-Mormon affiliated business outside of Utah.

### Community Judgment

Women experienced judgment for their same-sex sexuality from different members in the community. This fear of judgment caused many women to hide parts of themselves. Samantha does not tell others about her same-sex sexuality due to fear of judgment. Wendy states that she is very sensitive to cultural judgment.

Wendy: I still feel really repressed when I'm around people who are really strongly religious cause I feel like I'm going to offend them by expressing myself.

Rebecca: Having people judge you is very, very hard. Having his family judge, my husband's family judge me has been, it's been very, very difficult.

Women just want to be accepted. They want their decisions and their relationships to be accepted. Even when members of the community try to show some acceptance, the impact may still be perceived as rejection. The mantra 'love the sinner, but hate the sin' feels discordant. This message comes from the broader Christian community and is not isolated to Mormons specifically.

Aidan: [My friend] just cannot understand how he comes across as being judgmental to me. He literally cannot understand it. And I keep trying to say look you're being judgmental...because I asked him would you come to my wedding and he's like 'no because I don't believe in it. I believe it's wrong.

Homosexuality is wrong. But I love you.’ And I’m like how can you love me and tell me that who I am is wrong. And he’s like, ‘I’m not telling you that who you are is wrong. I’m just telling you that your behavior is wrong.’ And I said wait a minute here, it’s the whole package behaviors, feelings, the whole package it’s me. Literally, I think many heterosexual people literally cannot understand.

Quinn is just beginning to experience general society’s judgment and does not understand why other people vehemently oppose same-sex sexuality.

Quinn: I think I’m really struggling to understand why everybody has such a big issue with it. It’s like wait a minute I’m really not that different than you are. I don’t go home to my gay house, driving my gay car, eating my gay dinner. I mean it’s just not it. And it is just like you see people like prison mates and people that are drunk and having a one-night stand they can go and get married and that’s okay. Like I don’t get it. And so I think I’m just understanding a little bit about what it means to be part of the lesbian family, what it means to be family in that respect.

The community exerted pressure on women to conform to heterosexual and gender ideals. Many women felt like they did not fit this “cookie cutter” homemaker image, regardless of their same-sex sexuality. Women tended to disappear in the Church, as they got older and remained unmarried without children. Many stated the difficulty of being single in such a family-oriented religion. Most women eventually felt rejected due to their sexual orientation, gender, or relationship and motherhood status. Women received the message from their religious community not to question the belief system too extensively. This eventually led them to distance themselves from the community.

Heidi: So I needed to find other people in my life that I could sort of talk about these things with and they often weren’t Mormons because it felt like Mormons were really discouraging of any type of questioning of the Church.

### Loss of Mormon Community

Women in this study have different relationships with the Mormon Church at this time. Only a couple, regardless of religious identity, actively practices the religion.

Those who become inactive or dis-identify with Mormonism lose that community. Lynn states that the community was one of the reasons that made it hard for her to leave the Church. Some women try to hold on to participation in the Mormon religion for as long as they can while trying to find and build a same-sex relationship. Most are told that this cannot be done. Daisy Jane's friend, who identifies as lesbian, warned her that if she tries to hold on to both sides that it will not end well.

Losing the Mormon community represents a significant loss, a loss that Quinn describes as feeling homeless. The loss of community differs from loss of faith or belief. Several women reported that they missed the community, but not the Church itself. Some like Kathryn and Farah loved not having to go to church. The loss of community, however, is a loss of an entire support system. Many women distance themselves from people who interact with each other only in a religious setting.

The community rejects other women when they come out. Quinn lost all of her LDS friends except one during her process of excommunication. Because most of these women had been actively involved in the religion throughout their youth, most of their support network came from Mormon members. Some friends remained supportive and encouraging; many did not know how to support women. No longer being part of the Mormon community is in essence a loss of a safety net.

Wendy: It's also nice that people are there for each other. You call your Relief Society President or you call the Priesthood members to come help you do something if you are in a crisis. And I kind of feel more alone...more vulnerable in a situation.

Olivia: I don't have that net to catch me. It's very independent and not altogether comfortable. And I miss that. But I'm not willing to do what it would take to get that particular support group back in my life. I don't really know where to find another one.



Replacing a community that has played such a significant role in one's life is difficult to say the least. The LGBT community appears to be a deceptively easy replacement option. Many women reported disappointment in what they found in the LGBT community. While also called a community in name, the LGBT community is not like the structured, ready-made Mormon community. What people call the LGBT community represents a large diversity of people whose only similar traits may be a sexual orientation or gender identity. The LGBT community does not provide the same cohesive support network that a Mormon community provides.

Olivia: Like one of the things that frustrates me the most with not being active in the Church anymore is the absence of community. Like I am fairly active in the queer community. I do a lot. I work [with different LGBT organizations]. But it's more like a social group, it doesn't feel, like there is something unique about the Mormon ward and not about the Mormon ward, but Church gatherings in general that there is such a strong bond between the people that they'll do anything to help you. I know a lot of the times I feel trying to make the queer community my community, well you're really nice and I think you're funny and I think you're pretty and I'm just going to get drunk now so you want to come? And it's very frustrating to me not having the incredible support base that I did have when I was very active in the Church.

## **LGBT Community**

Barbarella: The thing I guess that's been more surprising for me recently is that I don't identify necessarily as much as I thought I would as part of the gay community...I think I had it in my head somehow because I think that gay community puts it out that they are community, which I think is actually a farce in a lot of ways. And I think I thought I could transition from one to another, but particularly I find in Utah it's very disconnected and painfully unorganized and very angry...when I'm in a group of like a roomful of gay people, I often find myself thinking I'm not like these people, maybe I'm not even gay. Like that will still come up for me because I feel so not connected to them. And I miss that. I mean I miss the sense of community. And I've tried to find that and I've tried to build it for myself and it's been really difficult.

Although not a ready-made LGBT community like a Mormon ward, people who identify with the LGBT community have some similarities and connections. Women connected with other same-sex oriented women not merely because of a shared sexual orientation, but because they found a camaraderie. Feeling isolated and alone in the heterosexual world, women finally knew other women who had similar experiences as themselves.

Wendy: Well there's definitely a culture around it. I know when I came out it was kind of a culture shock when I started hanging out in the gay community. One of the things that I liked about it was I could relate to the other lesbians, like their sense of humor was more like mine. Other experiences, not sexually related, were similar to mine.

Many women first developed friendships with other people who identified as LGBT prior to engaging with the larger LGBT community. Barbarella, Heidi, and Olivia both had significant friendships with gay boys in high school, which allowed them a safe place to discuss and process sexuality. Because of Olivia's high school support network she felt able to experiment with a sexual minority identity without fully committing to it. When Olivia no longer had this support network in college, she hid her sexual orientation. Holly found herself at a job where most of her co-workers identified as gay and this allowed her a safe space to try on a lesbian identity. Having friends who identified as LGBT provide support to women who previously felt condemned for experiencing same-sex sexuality. Only after Farah knew other lesbians did she and her partner allow themselves to consider whether they too might be lesbian. Ellen became involved in her school's gay club and this jettisoned her coming out. Olivia talked about having a close friend who she calls her "gaydance counselor" because this friend has taught her how to be gay, or rather introduced her into the larger community and

provided a model of someone who is confident in themselves and not ashamed of their sexuality. Aidan, when needing to be reaffirmed religiously as a gay person, will attend services at a welcoming congregation.

Aidan: So I go to this church and there's a lot of lesbians at this church, a lot of lesbians and gay people at this church. So when I'm feeling in the need for going to a church where I can see lesbians and gay men down the pew I will go there.

Going to large LGBT community events may pose concerns depending on the degree to which a woman is out. For example, Irene found herself pulled to different LGBT events, but felt as though she had to stand back in order not to be recognized because she had not come out and participating in the LGBT community could have jeopardized her job when she worked for the LDS Church. Women may hold stereotypes of sexual minorities and feel uncomfortable in the LGBT community because they do not fit these stereotypes.

Irene: I'm not totally out. It's a little bit of a struggle because I don't always...fit into these groups. Luckily though I found a core group of friends that are, that are not the pride going flag bearing group, but that are just kind of low-key and accepting and way cool.

This is not to say that those who identify with the LGBT community are unconditionally accepting while the Mormon community is rejecting. Many women felt support from the LGBT community when coming out; however, this support rarely extended to maintaining Mormon religious beliefs.

Andie: But I still can't understand why the friends that I have lost are not the ones in the Church, they're the ones out of the Church that couldn't be friends with me given the choices I've made. Even though I didn't change, I'm still the same person. So one of those things you just have to live with.

Some women feel like they do not fit in a Mormon community because they are gay and do not fit in the LGBT community because they are Mormon. Each group holds

prejudice for the other. Stargays sometimes wishes the Mormon Church had gay wards so that she could be around people with similar beliefs and similar experiences. She has thought of moving to San Francisco in order to be around other gay Mormons.

Holly: I think I didn't realize what the experience was going to be like until much later. Because with the Church you always have a built in community wherever you go. And so we, and a lot of our friends and family are in the Church, so we lost a lot of our support system.... We're still trying to build that up...because we're not sure where we fit. We didn't grow up in the LGBT community.... You can take the girl out of the Church, but you can't take the Church out of the girl. There are still remnants of it.

### **Rebuilding Community**

Many women reported difficulty rebuilding their community after losing their Mormon community. Barbarella, despite knowing that there are hundreds if not thousands of gay individuals who have very similar experiences to her own, continues to feel isolated and alone because she has not connected with anyone.

Barbarella: And I miss that. I mean I miss the sense of community. And I've tried to find that, and I've tried to build it for myself and it's been really difficult.

Aidan too missed the Mormon community. This, in fact, compelled her to return to activity in the Mormon Church. She wanted to be around others that shared a similar culture. One difficulty that may present itself is if a woman continues to hold Mormon values and standards, like not drinking alcohol. Several women have difficulty finding like-minded people in the LGBT community.

As women transition to a sexual minority identity, a few found it easier to do so within a new community. Holly found it refreshing to come to the Northwest where she found other people who had similar ideas that she never before felt free to express. Her previous community condemned her relationship. Her new community celebrated it.

Changing communities in order to rebuild may be easier because one is able to introduce herself as a sexual minority and does not have to challenge her community's pre-existing beliefs about who she is.

Daisy Jane: And it's nice to be in the new community because people can accept me as I am and how I am, who I am or not.

Women find ways to build community with other people whom identity as part of the LGBT community. Many actively sought to build an accepting community. They desired to know others who identify as a sexual minority. More specifically they sought other women like themselves given that males dominate LGBT events. Strategies that women used to rebuild community include establishing a lesbian book club, joining a school LGBT group, building supportive friends one at a time, joining a different religious community, going to LGBT community events or resource centers, and finding friends who are accepting and nonjudgmental. Kathryn describes her process of building a community when she attended with an event for lesbian women.

Kathryn: I sit down on this little bench and across from me is a woman sitting there and I look up and I'm like fuck it, "Hi. I'm Kathryn." So she is now my best friend in the world...the courage to just go show up there, there was an immediate result. I started building a community. So she and I became friends and I became friends with her friends and then I met this other friend who she was kind of friends with and then there's this group of friends. And just started building this community of people that they all said, 'hey you're okay.' And so the more they said I'm okay, the more I started to believe I'm okay. You start to realize yeah I have something to offer. There are people who look at me and think I'm an okay person, that I'm fun and they want to be around me. And you know it's just so, just building that community and that's my new church ward is my lesbian community.

## Coming Out

Coming out is a process of sharing one's sexual identity or sexual orientation with others. It starts with coming out to self and then slowly coming out to others. Only one participant, Samantha, is not out to anyone in her family or community. Samantha will discuss her struggles if someone she trusts confides in her, but would not announce it generally. Mel does not need to come out *per se* since she identifies as heterosexual. She has talked about her attractions and childhood same-sex experience with her siblings and husband. Coming out involves a fear of rejection.

Olivia: Like once I come out to my mom, then I have to come out to everyone else which is a much more mixed bag of emotions and I wish I was more distant from them. Like I kind of wish I didn't care so much about what they think because I genuinely adore every single member of my family. Like we're all flawed. We're all a little messed up, but we love each other and that's the predominant theme in our family is that no matter what you do, you are ok. But don't tread this far. Like you go over this line, no one knows what is going to happen cause no one has dared to go....And because everyone in my family is so religious like I have no idea what the consequences of going beyond that accepted line of misbehaving is.

Some of the women in this study come out quickly; others come out over an extended period of time. Some come out fully to everyone in their lives and others select certain people. Sometimes women do not intentionally choose to come out to an individual, but that individual discovers the information.

Stargays: For me it has been a very gradual process and it depends on the people that I talk to and the company that I'm in. There a lot of people who still don't know. They just think that it's odd that she's as old as she is and is not married and doesn't have children. So the wheels are turning in their head, but we don't ever talk about it. So there are some people who clearly know. There are some people I have clearly told. But there are some people that I can't because I know they're not okay with it. In fact, I lost friends over it. I hint to the fact. They have to know, in my mind, they have to know I'm gay. They have to know. Certain behaviors, certain comments, all that kind of stuff and if you spend enough time with me, in my mind I'm thinking how can you not know that. But

when it finally comes out in the open and you start talking about it, I end up losing friends because they're like holy crap she's gay.

As Stargays illustrates, coming out means opening oneself to the risk of losing relationships. Coming out is not an easy process. Many theories describe the coming out process, but logically understanding the coming out process cannot compare to experiencing the process firsthand.

Barbarella: I had hid behind gay men my whole life and I just felt like I sort of understood the coming out process. Just so fucking naïve, nobody understands what it's like to do it until you do it. No way. No way, no how.

This process is made more difficult due to culture in which these women come out.

Ellen: I don't think that the world understands how difficult it is to come out, especially in a culture that's so traditional.

Despite the difficulty in coming out, women often felt the need to come out to people in their lives due to their desire for honesty and authenticity. Who they come out to depends on that person's level of importance in their lives and the perceived difficulty in coming out to them. Irene is only out to her immediate family and does not feel the need to come out to extended family. On the other hand, Olivia is out to everyone but her family because she worries that coming out will negatively impact her family relationships. Because of the negative reaction Quinn has received from her family and religious community, she feels wary about coming out in other arenas of her life. People outside of the Church feel safer, but she still does not feel the need to discuss her sexuality with anyone at her work.

Quinn: I mean I have one friend at work who knows and that's it because there's so much prejudice and homophobia and I haven't had a positive experience with it so I still would say I'm very quiet about it.

Coming out presents an important psychological process because women are able to break through their isolation. Daisy Jane believes divine inspiration directed her to begin voicing her experience and, in a sense, started coming out in order to heal from her years of hiding and shame. All of the women in this study moved from a place of shame and secret to one of openness. As women begin to come out, they discovered that coming out is not a singular event.

Barbarella: The coming out process isn't ever really done. And every new job I have and every new person I meet and because for whatever reason I don't necessarily strike people as gay probably because I had hid it for so long...so there's always this point where I inevitably have to say no I don't have a boyfriend or and it's because...sometimes I'm okay with it and sometimes I'm not, but sometimes I get really frustrated with the fact that I have to make a choice to come out to somebody or not.

Women tend to first come out to trusted individuals. They often came out to individuals they knew would be supportive. They picked out people who they believed would accept them regardless of the disclosure.

Heidi: I started to come out gradually with friends at first, friends that were gay at first, which were the safest of course. And then friends that were close to me. And most of my friends were very open-minded...And then I started to come out to my family.

Aidan first came out to the school nurse. After holding this fear within herself for so many years and believing that her same-sex sexuality made her evil, the positive and supportive response she received from her school provided guidance in her coming out.

Aidan: I said I'm afraid I'm a homosexual. And [the school nurse] said, 'well thank goodness. Finally you've realized this. Now you can just be happy and now we can all just relax and rest.'

Beyond friends Irene has met in the LGBT community, she has only come out to her immediate family. Given her family's reaction, she does not perceive being out to



everyone who knew her before she accepted a lesbian identity as being positive. She expects coming out to others will make them sad and upset.

Irene: That's the only really coming out that I've done. Intentionally coming out...I mean there are a lot of people that obviously that don't know. But I don't feel like they're the core part of my life and so I don't really feel a true need to sit them down and make them cry.

As women started coming out to more and more people, the less control that they had over who knows the information because inevitably someone will tell another person and then the information explodes throughout their social network. Although most women experienced at least one negative reaction to coming out, women also received a surprising amount of support. Most of the women in this study do not conform to stereotypes of lesbians; therefore, even people who knew them for years did not guess their sexual orientation. Holly stated that a lot of people react with surprised that she and her partner are gay and in a romantic relationship. Barbarella said that most people reacted with surprise, but also support.

Olivia: A lot of reactions after that it wasn't a 'I knew it' but 'oh, that explains a lot' kind of reaction.

It appears that women experienced most difficulty or greatest concern coming out to their mothers, husbands, and children. I presented women's experience of coming out to their parents and families in general and in greater detail in the previous section on family in order to fully present the familial context in which the phenomenon occurs. In the following sections, I present women's experiences of coming out to their husbands, their children, their friends, and finally to the community at large.

### **Coming Out to Husbands**

The greatest difficulty in coming out to one's husband is that it threatens the relationship they have. Heidi and Daisy Jane clearly informed their husbands, prior to marriage, of their sexual orientation because they both felt it important to begin that relationship with honesty. Daisy Jane specifically chose her husband because she wanted "someone I could share my feelings with because I didn't want to marry someone and try to hide that."

Mel, Quinn, and Rebecca came out to their husbands after they had been married. Mel's husband supported her. He had no reason to feel threatened by the disclosure due to her commitment to him. Quinn and Rebecca on the other hand came out after they had fallen in love with another woman and wanted to end the marriage with their husband.

Quinn: [I] came out to my husband. As you can imagine that did not go well. He said he knew. He accepted it okay until he realized that I wasn't just gay and saying I was going to stay in the relationship and work on it and that we would remain celibate with each other and basically be roommates for the rest of our lives, that I actually wanted to be with my current partner. And so he outed me to my entire family out of anger and he's good friends with my bishop.

Husbands may retaliate against their wives. Quinn, Daisy Jane, and Rebecca all had this experience. Even though Daisy Jane's husband accepted her sexual orientation prior to entering the marriage, he used it to control her in the marriage. When she left him, he told their entire community that she left him for another woman. Rebecca's husband talked about her same-sex affair to people within their ward creating a judgmental environment for Rebecca.

Only Parker's husband responded with kindness. She came out to him after they had divorced. Like the other husbands, the information had the potential to threaten his

masculinity. Parker stated, “It was painful for him when I came out, but he was supportive. He was kind about it.”

### **Coming Out to Children**

Women perceived coming out to their children as threatening because women often held these relationships as the most important relationships in their lives. They feared damaging that relationship. Women also took into account their children’s’ developmental level and other circumstances as they determined when and how to come out to their children. Rebecca has not come out to her children. They know her partner and love her due to the relationship they developed when her partner lived with their family for several years. Rebecca wants to wait to disclose the type of relationship she now has with her partner because she wants her children to first get used to the idea that she and her husband are divorcing. A couple of women chose to come out to their oldest child, while waiting to come out to younger children. Quinn’s youngest child does not understand the extent of Quinn’s relationship with her partner. She believes them merely to be friends, despite the fact that they live together. During a conversation about Quinn marrying again, she asked her youngest daughter what if she married her current partner. She daughter responded, “You can’t marry Marcia, she’s a girl.” All of the children who knew their mother’s sexuality accepted this information.

Quinn: The scariest thing I ever had to do was come out to my oldest daughter. I was scared to death she was going to not want me anymore and not love me anymore and want to go live with her dad, which is a possibility any time someone comes out. She was wonderful.

Parker: I kind of explained in a very high level what it meant and she was really sad, really just cried and cried. And the next morning she said that she had had a dream and grandpa had talked to her about what I had told her and that he had

told her everything was going to be fine and everything was going to be okay and so she said 'so it's okay mom.'

Daisy Jane left her children because she feared the disclosure of her sexual orientation would harm them. Her ex-husband told their children that he had something to tell them that would make them not want to live with her. For 4 years, she did not have much interaction with them as her ex-husband did not allow her the opportunity. During a summer visit they asked if they could live with her instead of their dad, Daisy Jane took this opportunity to come out to her oldest son so that he could make an informed choice about where he wanted to live. Coming out created a better relationship between them.

Daisy Jane: I don't think he quite knows what to do with his mom, but he's so cute and accepting and just amazing. My boys believe in me where for years they were afraid of me and this awful secret that their dad had to tell about me.

In contrast, Samantha believes that coming out would be incredibly harmful to her son despite that fact that her son does not believe in the Mormon Church and has friends who identify as lesbian.

Samantha: I wasn't going to come out and say I'm gay to the world especially after my ex-husband did that and I thought here's my son with one gay parent and all he needs is two. That will really screw him up you know.

### **Coming Out to Friends**

Coming out to friends may result in a loss of friendship; although, some friends remain supportive and encouraging. Having friends who accept sexual diversity made it easier for women to come out. Other friends could not reconcile their religious beliefs with their friend's same-sex sexuality.

Farah: Yet even some of our best friends at church were at first seemingly supportive and then ah I can't do this, I don't know how to be your friend.

When Stargays came out to her ward's women's group, she experienced rejection to the point that she chose to join the military in order to get away from them. Women may choose not to tell a friend because of concerns that the disclosure would damage their friendship due to their friend's religious beliefs. Many women tended to have an extensive network of Mormon friends due to the merging of social and religious worlds. Women experienced double jeopardy in these cases. Their friends might reject them due to their sexual orientation or due to reduce or discontinued activity within the Mormon Church.

Heidi experienced coming out twice, first as lesbian and then as bisexual. She states, "I remember feeling the same sort of fear again like oh no am I going to be rejected?" She felt scared to tell her lesbian friends, but stated none of them really cared. Some heterosexual friends disregarded her same-sex sexuality calling it a phase when she came out as bisexual. Their dismissal of her experiences ended their friendship.

### **Coming Out to Community**

Some women are only out to family and friends. Other women are out to everyone and do not hide their sexual identify from anyone. After Ellen and her first girlfriend broke up, she attended the LGBT student group on campus.

Ellen: I told them my life story and how hard it was and that I was aching to be out and so that was the first time that I came out and then we had national coming out Day. When I came out on campus with a microphone on the quad like I remember that being that day that I've felt most at peace and comfortable and freed and alive, ready to take on the world as a lesbian.

Other women come out more subtly. Parker's neighbors know that she is in a same-sex partnership and her all of her daughter's friends know. She does not know if the parents of her daughter's friends know, but this is not due to explicit withholding or hiding. Parker believes that it is important for other people to see that same-sex relationships are as normal and common as any other heterosexual relationship in the community. Olivia first came out to her peer mentor group. Breaking the silence that she held for so long felt freeing. She discussed her transition from coming out to specific people to being out in almost all aspects of her life.

Olivia: It was like a whole wall just exploded and came tumbling down and in that corner of my life I could be open and free again. And that kind of spring boarded me into coming out to everybody else. It was a gradual process...I was still coming out to specific people who I knew would support me. That I knew it would be ok. And then from then just evolving into the point where if it's appropriate, like in my French class and talking about dating and what we want in a mate, I will use feminine pronouns and talk about my ideal girlfriend. And people will blink and then just go on with their lives. It doesn't matter.

Kathryn: There are pictures of [my partner] here in the office so. I don't, it's not the first thing you know about me when you meet me, but if you ask I'm certainly going to say yeah. I don't change my pronouns; it's always she. So yeah I think I am basically out but not, I wouldn't call it flag-waving, but you know there's an equality sticker on my car. People know that I have a partner.

### **Coming Out as Not Mormon**

Half the sample has more than one coming out. They also face the process of coming out as non-Mormon. The women who no longer believed in the Mormon religion had to decide to whom they would share this information and how much they would share. Coming out as a sexual minority was difficult enough and coming out as non-Mormon was just as or more difficult for many women. This was not true for women

like Heidi who came out as non-Mormon first. Most women's families, except Judi's, expected them to identify as Mormon.

Lynn: They don't know that I'm not Mormon. They still think that I go to church at the Mormon Church...I thought like telling my mother that I was gay was the worst thing that I would have to do and now I think telling her that I'm not Mormon may perhaps be just as bad.

Several women stated that identifying as non-Mormon did or would devastate their families.

Parker: When I came out to my parents it, my no longer being in the Church, was far more devastating to my mom than my being a lesbian. Way more devastating.

Some women tried to hide this fact from their families. Women who chose to take off their garments worried about their families noticing that they no longer wore them because then their families would know that they did not participate or believe in the Mormon religion. Barbarella talks about her grandparents being devastated when they found out that she no longer wore her garments. She does not know if they know whether or not she is gay. While Holly's parents know that she no longer participates in the Mormon religion, she has not told her parents that she has removed her name from the Church records.

Holly: Part of it's because I know it would devastate them and the other part of it is that I don't want a lecture and that's what I would get from them.

Families appeared to be more willing to accept a woman's sexual identity than to accept their non-Mormon religious identity. Of course, this came with the belief that the women should remain celibate so that they can remain a full member in good standing with the LDS Church.

Irene: It's been painful because you know as I've come to recognize that gay and also that I'm leaving the Church I look at it as two separate things. My family I knew would just wad it all together and oh my gosh it's because you, you're

influenced by your friends and yada, yada, yada. But I see it as two separate things and I wasn't sure which one was going to be more painful to them. And as it's turned out they're like yeah, yeah, yeah, we know you're gay, but I can't believe that you, how can you not believe Joseph Smith's not a prophet. Think about it he's. Really? Really? That gay thing just nothing, they don't even care. They're just like not a big deal. Okay. But of course the caveat of that is you can be gay all you want you just can't act on it. So you can still be LDS, you can still be involved, da, da, da. You got to get your testimony back. Your testimony is gone because...you've driven the spirit away, whatever that thing is. So it's been, it's been, yeah surprising kind of. I don't know, maybe not. Maybe not as surprising as I wish it were.

### Mental Health

The intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict that women experience between their religious identity and sexual orientation may affect mental health.

Andie: And all the time still having so much guilt and so much depression that it really, it still has affected me. You know I do suffer from anxiety secondary to depression and it all stems from this conflict.

While struggles between sexuality and religious beliefs negatively affect mental health, it should be noted that some women did not report experiencing any mental health concerns. A higher portion did. Fourteen women reported diagnoses of depression and/or use of anti-depressant medications. Additionally, anxiety co-occurred with the depression for several of these women. Several women stated that despite the resolution of their beliefs with their sexuality, they believed that they would deal with anxiety and/or depression for the rest of their lives. Three women have a diagnosis of Bipolar disorder.

Many women reported that experiences with the Mormon Church and the subsequent conflict with their sexuality directly caused negative mental health. Feelings of same-sex attraction that conflicted with religious beliefs, feelings of not fitting



Mormon gender roles, or living a dual life caused depression and/or self-hatred.

However, this was not always the case. Some women experienced depression prior to recognizing their sexuality. Women who have bipolar disorder received this diagnosis prior to their sexual questioning.

For Olivia and Jessica, their depression significantly interfered with their undergraduate education. Jessica lost a scholarship at a private school because of depression's effects on her grades. Olivia came close to dropping out of college. Barbarella also experienced depression during her undergrad work. Her severe depression created periods of time when she could not even get out of bed. Her depression stemmed not from her recognition of her same-sex sexuality, but from not fitting within the heterosexual script and could not understand why.

Six women did not report long-term mental health concerns, yet at least 2 women who did not experience recurrent anxiety reported having an anxiety or panic attack either when in attendance at church meetings or in the Mormon Temple. In all, at least 18 women have sought help from therapists and have used counseling to discuss the conflicts between their religious beliefs and their sexuality.

### **Self-worth**

Much of mental health appears tied to self-worth. Same-sex sexuality damaged self-worth because women viewed their sexuality in direct contrast to their belief system. Guilt and shame fueled depression and anxiety. Since their sexuality did not change, they viewed themselves as inherently defective.

Irene: I think it's just having that I'm not good enough mentality. You just have to realize where did that come from...it's not as related to sexuality or the Church, but it's all kind of enmeshed. So no it's more just self-worth I think.

Kathryn: One of the things that I used to say over and over again in therapy...was just a very negative view of myself. I'm just horrible. I'm just horrible. And my therapist would say, "Why are you horrible?" And I could never articulate what that was. But so I'm not going to church. I've had a relationship with a woman. I was horrible. I was evil. I was dirty.

Lynn: I had to I guess analyze where my feelings of low self-esteem were coming from and why was I feeling depressed and then that's when I came to realize a lot of it was from being gay and feeling inferior and relating to that. And yet knowing that no matter how hard I tried, no matter what the hell I accomplished in life, it was never going to be enough for them because I would always be gay. So I would always fail and the most important things in Mormonism getting married to a man in the Temple and having kids.

Daisy Jane, prior to her first same-sex relationship, attempted to conform to expectations of marriage and found a returned Mormon missionary who fit the ideal for which she felt she needed to strive.

Daisy Jane: I tried to marry the guy and I just didn't get the support of my mom. In fact, she was so upset, that upset me a lot. Because here I had worked for the ideal that I thought I was supposed to work toward and created a good opportunity or situation as I saw it, the best it could be, and she was so displeased. And what I knew I really wanted would be shattering to her. And so I felt like there was no hope for me. It was really hopeless. It was dark. And so I did, I went into a deep depression because I didn't know how I would marry anyone.

While same-sex feelings and lack of relationships contribute to the depression, women's interpretation of these experiences and their thoughts fed into negative mental health and self-loathing. Women believed that there was no answer and that any option they chose would result in additional pain, rejection, and isolation.

Andie: Everybody is going to hate me whether I turn out to be gay or whether I go to the Church. They're going to hate me. There is nowhere to turn. There is nowhere to turn. I'm stuck. I'm sunk. I'm lost. I'm one of those that just couldn't cut it and I'm lost. And all I could see is that there was so much hurt that I couldn't see or feel anything else because there was no way out. There was nowhere to turn. Nowhere to go.

Some women experienced their depression psychosomatically

Chris: I started to have a complete break down. I literally was suicidal. And I couldn't work. I would cry at work. I would shake...I never in my life will let myself get to that point again, ever. It was absolute hell. I mean I felt physically ill, emotionally ill, spiritually ill....It took over my whole being.

Daisy Jane: I got really sick and I started expressing physical symptoms of my, what's going on inside, and I started having seizures, and it was all stress related. And I got really, really ill, and just really sick.

## **Suicide**

Even if the conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality was not the direct cause of mental health, all reported that the struggle exacerbated their symptoms. Because of women's negative experiences and negative thoughts, they questioned their worthiness and some considered taking their own lives. One woman reported that although she never became suicidal, she had thoughts that it would be better if she were not alive. The severity of religious conflict produced suicidal ideation in 10 women, ranging from vague thoughts and passive suicidal gestures like risk-taking behaviors to serious suicide attempts, such as the use of firearms.

Chris: I never actually attempted, but there were times I would just want to die and I would verbalize that. I would write it in my journal, that I want to die because nothing is worth the pain that I am in. It was the worst, it's the physical pain.

Rebecca: I did [come close to making a suicide attempt] earlier in my marriage...it was a long time ago but I think it stems from my issues with same-sex attraction, always feeling imperfect. I was still the imperfect part of me...It's not that I'm unbalanced. I don't feel imbalanced. I just feel imperfect. Does that make sense? And when you get to that lowest point, you just don't think of anything else but stopping the pain. You just want the pain to stop. The mental pain you're going through....And if you're so imperfect, you're going to hell anyways so why not just quicken the process.

Aidan: Partly it was because of my homosexual feelings that I felt this way. Partly, I also have a really hard time liking myself as a woman. I mean I was very, very sensitive so I saw guys, boys my own age holding the priesthood and these boys teased me and beat me up and caused me horrible, hellish pain and yet they were worthy enough to hold the priesthood. I felt like that made me, a woman, a second-class citizen. Not only a second class citizen, but like why on earth was I born if I was just born to be in a population a) woman b) lesbian that was doomed from the start. There was no chance. There was no hope. I felt like well suicide is self murder and that's a sin too, but what's the difference between that...It was like what's the difference between killing oneself or being gay? It's all the same. I'm still going to go to hell whichever way it is. And it's still something that I, on my bad days, will struggle with.

Two women, who have historically engaged in cutting or self-harm (nonsuicidal behaviors), sometimes used self-harm as form a punishment or control for their sexuality.

Lynn: You grew up learning punishment changes bad behavior and so I felt like having these attractions was a bad behavior and if I punish myself when I had them then that would hopefully change that behavior and I would become attracted to men. And so I mean that was one of the reasons. Another reason for cutting was because I hated myself and so it just, I don't know, let out a lot of frustration that way. And I just I felt better after doing it.

Three other women experienced suicidal thoughts/attempts prior to questioning their sexuality and not related to the phenomenon being studied at hand.

Kathryn: Because I was confused and depressed. I went through a lot of suicidal thoughts even from junior high on. Where I can't really, even at the time couldn't put my finger on what it was. I had friends. I had a family. I have food to eat. I have clothes on my back, but I was horribly depressed. Just times that I would be, just throw the covers over your head, don't want to talk to anybody.

However, coming close or actually attempting when younger left suicide a possibility when women recognized their same-sex sexuality in later years.

Olivia: I attempted suicide when I was in 8th grade. It wasn't related to sexuality. There were a lot of other dark things that were going on in my life and I never let it get that far again. But it was always kind of in the back of my mind, if this doesn't work out if I can't do this, it's not that hard. It's what 10 bucks to buy that many pills. It's just, I try not to be conscious of it and planning it. But it was always kind of a subconscious, well if I just leave my seatbelt unbuckled, if something happens, oh darn. Like I wouldn't try actively, but I kind of got a little

be reckless. Like just to chance it. Just to see if anything would happen. Almost to force some emotion into something.

As a teenager, Judi experienced severe depression and suicidal thoughts that were alleviated for a number of years because she converted to the Mormon religion. She later experienced suicidal thoughts again and made a suicidal gesture by swallowing a few pills because of conflict resulting from her religious leader's reactions to her sexuality and subsequent discomfort in her living environment. For Jessica, suicidal thoughts came less from sexuality and more because of her disability and being forced to be dependent on family who did not support her.

Jessica: Honestly it was a control thing like they could not, I could kill myself and they couldn't take that a way from me. They could make me miserable, but I could still, I could win...so I don't think it was necessarily I wanted to kill myself.

### **Psychotropic Medications**

Because depression became a life or death situation, several women began taking anti-depressants. Some stated that they believed they would be on medication for the rest of their lives.

Chris: But, bottom line is I got better...it took me about 6 weeks to find the right anti-depressant for me...I eventually got on Zoloft and I've been on that ever since. And it has saved my life right there. I mean that has been my lifesaver. It really has.

Others came off their medication as they reconciled the thoughts and feelings that produced the depression.

Barbarella: I really think, I feel very strongly about this, I feel like I went on antidepressants for probably 6 or 7 years, well I stopped taking them when I finally figured out that I was gay and I think the two are directly related. I mean I really feel like I wasn't dealing with my emotions and my sexuality and in such a suppressed way that I literally had no idea and it was manifesting itself in this really sort of deep depression and eating. Yeah you know for years. But then

when I finally figured out what was going on I feel like I realized, I went off antidepressants and yeah never felt better.

## **Individual Counseling**

Not every woman who felt depressed needed medications. Many women, whether diagnosed with a mental illness or not, sought counseling in order to reconcile their feelings and experiences with their religious beliefs. For several women such as Andie, Kathryn, Parker and Irene, they first came out about their sexuality to their therapist.

Women found therapy helpful when their therapist worked on self-esteem, self-acceptance, and provided support. What they found extremely unhelpful or even harmful was when a therapist dismissed their sexuality or tried to force her or his beliefs onto the women.

Aidan: I would slash myself as a teenager and that's why they brought Child Protective Services in and they sent me to a therapist. The first therapist was okay, but didn't really understand how to get to what's really is going on because I couldn't express anything at that time. This therapist was a Mormon therapist and by parents felt like okay maybe this therapist will work. Basically, I told her I think I might be, but I think. And she said well just read the Book of Mormon and you won't be gay. And no therapy could happen after that. The rest of the few months of therapy I was like I'm not even listening, I'm turning off.

Nicole: I go to the therapist every week and we've tried to address this issue and she, she's a younger woman and she had just barely gotten endowed and barely gotten married in the Temple so she's...in a very concrete place in the Church. And so I, I tried to address this issue with her and she's tries to kind of say, 'Well you're trying to figure out who you want to become and stuff, but and that's great but you know you, you've felt lost for the longest time and I think you're kind of just going along with, with whatever thought pops into your mind. And it's very hard for me to express and get her to understand...and she knows a lot about my relationships with men and she says, 'You're going after women now because your poor experiences with men and that's all.' And I'm like no that's not all and it's very hard to explain to her my attractions to woman. We're not on the same page. And so, so I've tried to find other means of therapy. It's just very

frustrating. And I feel like I don't know how to present myself in a way to convince people this is really truly how I feel. I'm not just trying to get weird attention....And it's just very frustrating.

## LDS Social Services

Some women turned to or were referred to LDS Social Services, which is a Church sponsored agency that provides counseling within the framework of the Mormon belief system. Most women did not have a good experience with LDS Social Services.

Andie: One of the things that my bishop set out was an appointment with the head of the LDS social services, a woman that is kind of considered the same-sex attraction guru for the Church and teaches all the other counselors about same-sex attraction. And he set up an appointment for me to go see her. Ah, that was the biggest nightmare. Basically what it came out is that she said that this is a choice. That I chose this and was socialized this way because I chose it. But I said but wait a minute, you can't tell me that a person at age 6 chooses their sexual identity. I didn't know what sex is, let alone choosing their sexual identity. And she says well that's the way it is, that you've chosen it and that. And I said well how do you account then for me knowing at age 6 that I was this way. And why would I choose this when it has gone against everything that I hold dear to my heart? But it's also a part of my identity. Why would I choose this? Why would I choose to be depressed and attempt suicide? To suffer from anxiety? Why would I choose that? To go against, to make my family unhappy? Why? And she says, 'Well the only way I can explain it is that something terrible must have happened in your youth.' Nothing happened in my youth. My youth was fine. And so that really angered me.

Chris: I went through LDS Social Services, which was horrible. They just beat me down big time. That is the worst thing that you can do....that is the worst, worst, worst thing....When I would go they would tell me that that the penis was ok and that, you know, there must have been...[sexual] abuse...when I was young and naïve I believed. I would believe everything that they said cause I didn't know differently...but now I don't believe that's the case. I think I have always been gay. I've always loved women. But at the time I accepted everything that they said and of course everything was pray, pray, pray, get on your knees, fasting and prayer.

Jessica: My mom got me therapy at LDS Family Services in Ogden. It was possibly the worst therapeutic experience of my life. She told me that she could not give me sexual identity counseling and I was like what does that even mean. She wanted to have a therapy, a family therapy session, she wanted my parents to

come in and she wanted me to share my feelings with them, but I refused and so eventually I just stopped going and just repressed shit for a while.

Daisy Jane had a positive experience with LDS Social Services because at the time she began services she had the same goal as they had for her, to return to Church and to work toward a heterosexual relationship.

Daisy Jane: And then when I went to LDS Social Services they were just supportive of my desire to come back. Very supportive. And my therapist was really, really good in that he gave me some important tools that I've carried with me.

The Church also referred women with same-sex attractions to 12-Step Programs.

Andie: I've also had people in the Church and I even considered it going to the Church's 12-step program. Not because I see it, not because it is a sexual addiction but to try and, I don't know why, to try and...I don't know, but it's the wrong thing. You are not going to go to a 12-step program for something that is natural to you. That is not an addiction. It's not an addiction. So that isn't helpful either. They are trying through things at it and they don't work. And that is a source of frustration.

Daisy Jane strongly recommends that 12-step program; however, she is very clear that her addiction is not her same-sex sexuality, but the addiction she had to Xanax which she used to suppress her sexuality. She has used 12-step in her healing process to voice her conflict and her acceptance of her same-sex sexuality.

Daisy Jane: And so I didn't know how to go about, go about talking about it but it worked out that the 12-step meeting was a good place for me to talk about it. So I called LDS Social Services and so mind you like all through the years I stayed in therapy just trying to, trying to be married to a man. So I've been in therapy on and off through my whole marriage, he didn't know what I was talking about all the time but just that's what I had to do to do it. So, so in the 12 step program I started voicing and, and I guess essentially like in a way coming out.



## **Reparative Therapy**

The Church also referred women to Evergreen, an organization that attempts to help individuals within the Mormon Church who struggle with same-sex attraction. Evergreen has historically supported the notion that individuals could change their orientation to heterosexual. A few women had minor encounters with Evergreen, a phone call or reading their online message/chat room. These activities turned both Andie and Ellen away from the organization. Although no women actively engaged with Evergreen, a few women did try to change their sexual orientation through other services.

Lynn: After undergrad I went down to BYU...and then I did reparative therapy down there because I had tried everything else that I could think of not to be gay. And one of the counselors or psychologists at BYU was just yeah reparative therapy will work like if you're willing to put forth the effort, it's possible to change your sexual orientation. So then like that consisted of basically I had to wear an elastic band on my wrist and anytime I felt attraction for women I'd snap myself elastic band and then...I was supposed to spend an hour or 2 hours a day thinking of women as disgusting and these abusive people and think of men as these wonderful people. And imagine how wonderful it would be to spend time with them. And things like that. And at first I thought that the reparative therapy had worked because well I wasn't feeling attracted to men, but I wasn't feeling attracted to women either. But I think overall I was just so depressed that I wasn't really feeling any sexual feelings by the end of the semester. And I ended up putting on 40 pounds over like 3 months.

## **Group Counseling**

While many women reported that individual therapy helped them through their issues of self-worth, a few found group counseling to be most beneficial for coming to terms with their sexuality because they meet other women who had similar experiences as themselves. This connection to other women who also experienced conflict about their sexuality helped women feel less alone.

Irene: It was amazing. That is just the whole Church, you know the Church doesn't accept me for who I am. They don't and they won't. And that's, that's hard. For someone else to kind of say the same things that they don't fit in and they don't belong regardless of the fact that they've been active their whole life, that's hard to hear because I felt that way, but it's also liberating because I love to not be alone. So yeah it was fantastic.

Kathryn: Started doing the group therapy and I really think that was, the individual therapy was really important, but the group therapy was a normalization. So it was sitting in a room with people who don't all look like me, but all identified as lesbian and all were struggling and saying the same things I'm saying. And just that realization that I'm not the only one. And it kind of opened me up to the community.

## **Healing from Mental Health**

Women learned to love and accept themselves. They worked on obtaining a healthy self-concept. They changed the negative messages that they gave themselves.

Rebecca: I think that I was depressed because I couldn't figure out, I think that most of it is I couldn't figure out why I was like this. Does that make sense? I think all my depression stems from why do I have to experience this. Why do I have to experience this imperfection? Does that make sense? To me I think I'm broken but more and more each day I don't feel that. I'm starting to learn to accept it and make changes so that I can accept it.

Kathryn: You hit bottom and you got nowhere to go back up, right. So we started building. Just trying to build a healthy view of me and a healthy view of the world and a healthy relationship with my family.

Several women healed from their depression once they stopped attending church because they no longer received constant messages from their community that their same-sex sexuality made them evil.

Lynn: After I left the Church that's when I felt a huge shift in my mental health because I wasn't hearing all of these messages all the time...like I don't have to take antidepressants anymore. I'm happy most of the time. Granted, there are days that are bad, but everybody has those. Whereas before growing up it was like most of my days were bad and I'd have a day here and there where I actually felt happy and that was like value those days because not too many of them come along. Whereas now it's like I am happy most of the time. I understand now

what it's like, I guess, to live life and I don't feel like I really felt that before because I was mostly just miserable before and depressed. And I couldn't understand why people would want to live to be 100 because I didn't even want to live to be 25. And now it's like oh I understand now why people like being alive and I understand why people like living because there a lot of good things you can look forward to. But for me before it was, it didn't feel that way. But when I stopped kind of like living up to other people's expectations and it didn't really become a problem...I mean it took a long time to get here to this point.

Chris: Either I'm in the Church and I'm depressed and lonely or I'm out of the Church and I'm going to go to hell. That is where all of the depression came from, which is why now A) I'm on Zoloft and B) I just don't even go to church. I can't face it.

Same-sex sexuality and negative mental health outcomes are correlated, but same-sex sexuality does not always cause negative mental health. Many women who experienced same-sex sexuality did not experience depression. Those who experienced depression recognized other factors in their life that contributed to their depression.

Lynn: So I don't think all that depression stems just from the Church. I think a lot of it was from other things and I think that growing up gay even outside of the Mormon Church would have been difficult in Southeast Idaho.

Stargays: And being stuck in a community where people are so negative against me because of various reasons, not just for the fact that I'm gay, actually contributes to a really poor mental health situation.

Aidan: So I have a lot of issues to deal with. So this is just one thread which when I get depressed about everything else that's going on in my life, like things at work aren't going well, this is just the thing that will raise its head and tell me 'you're gay: therefore God does not love you: therefore you can't ever go to heaven.' And it's just really difficult and I don't know...how many of us are out there who have a similar story of pain.

Yet, despite the pain, trauma, and suffering, women sought happiness. This emphasis on resilience and determination echoed throughout women's stories. They sought self-acceptance. They sought healing.

## Reconciling

As shown, women have many painful experiences due to conflict between their religious and sexual identities. Many women suffer significantly as they attempt to understand and resolve the conflict that they feel. Again, not all women experienced conflict between religious and sexual identities because they may have already dis-identified with their religious identity prior to questioning their sexuality. However, most women did have to engage in a reconciliation process. Reconciling the two identities does not occur at one point in time. Women often struggle during this process. They struggle to know the right choices for their lives.

Irene: I think I want to accept myself, but it's shaky ground because if I give up my family, it's like maybe I should bag up the whole thing. You know suck it up and get back on my acting trip, just make it good for them because ugh family crying is the worst...I can't do it, if I could do it I would have done it. I can't do it. So I'm struggling.

Making a choice whether or not to actively participate in the religion and accept a sexual minority identity does not necessarily end the struggle.

Andie: I made the right choice for me. But I know that it...will be a struggle for the rest of my life because I'm not dead. Because I still have those feelings. But well I've consigned myself to a life of being alone, and that that hurts. And I still have people chide me all the time for my choice and how could I possibly do that and why would I give in or cave to the Church. That isn't it. I've even had one of my physicians say, "Why don't you just find a church that is more gay friendly?" It's not about that. They don't believe what I believe. I have certain beliefs. And I am this way and...I made my choice.

Aidan: I'm involved in a ton of gay and lesbian stuff now. I've been doing all kinds of things. I'm on the University's LGBT concerns committee and president of an LGBT outdoor club. I have written historical articles about LGBT history. I'm working on, starting to work on a film about local LGBT history, which I hope to be in production with in February. So I try to attach myself to those kinds of activist kinds of things to offset the deep-seated fear that I have that I am going to go to hell.

Eventually most women felt as though they must make a choice between their sexual identity and their religious identity, at least to some extent. They could not maintain a foot in both worlds. At the very least, women must decide their activity level within the Church and whether or not to have an intimate relationship with another woman. They often based their choice on the circumstances and experiences women have had up to that point.

Jessica: I feel like I couldn't have, I can't have both. I feel like I have to have one or the other.

Daisy Jane: I did try to deprogram myself at BYU, but to me that was betraying myself...I just don't think suppression is at all good for me. It put me into deep depression. So, I don't know I, it's hard because I don't really see an alternative for me other than to leave the Church if, if and when I find someone I want to be with.

Despite the pain and negative experiences, the women in this study did not remain in spaces of despair and hopelessness between the pulls of the diverging identities. Although women may initially believe that no resolution to the conflict exists, they still seek resolution; one cannot remain in suffering. The process of reconciliation and the end result is unique to each woman's journey. Women choose what is right for them and did not claim to know the right path for any other woman who experiences this phenomenon.

Andie: Now don't get me wrong because I am not saying that people who don't choose this same path that they choose to live the lifestyle, I think there are wonderful things in the next life no matter what you choose. There are amazing things that we cannot possibly fathom. And I'm not making a judgment on choose this or choose that. Absolutely not. I'm the last person in the world that could say to anyone choose this or choose that. Na-uh. It's very personal. And I think there are amazing things no matter which you choose.

In the end, each woman must decide for herself how to live her life. All the women sought to live their lives as honestly and authentically as possible in a manner

that provided them with the greatest peace and happiness. Reconciliation is a process that leads to these end results. It requires effort and periods of discomfort as women experiment with different options and challenge their previous belief system. It also appears to be a forward moving, although reiterative, process.

Heidi: I've worked so hard to get to this point where I'm like open and honest with who I am.

### **Seeking Honesty and Authenticity**

Seeking to live honestly and authentically may, for some women, mean actively practicing the Mormon religion and remaining celibate according to religious proscriptions. For other women, it means choosing to pursue and engage in a same-sex relationship. Figuring out one's authentic self is not easy. Different perspectives offer different answers about what it means to be authentic.

Andie: I don't know honestly. I don't know if I know what my authentic self is because my authentic self is a dilemma. I feel like I am living, if we take a look at the eternal scheme of things, I'm probably living more like myself then if I were living in a relationship. And I'm more at peace with the way that I'm living. If you take it just this time and this world, no I still feel like a fraud. Because I feel that there are two opposing parts of me that are genuinely me and I can't live them both at the same time completely.

It remains difficult to actively participate in the Mormon Church and have a sexual relationship with a woman without feeling guilt. In most cases, women will choose to remove themselves from some religious practices in order to not appear misrepresentative. Women may step down from teaching positions because they do not want to teach what they do not believe or teach religious practices that they are not living. Several women choose to discontinue wearing their religious garments because they did

not want to disrespect the religion by wearing garments when not living the standards the garments represented.

Stargays: That if I'm going to do this, then I can't lie about it. I can't pretend that things aren't the way they are kind of thing. Which to me continuing to wear the garments and continuing to go to the Temple and go to church and all the stuff would have been worse than acknowledging the fact that I was gay.

Irene: I've been playing this charade for so long, I can't do it...My number one goal right now is to be authentic. I want to be as true to myself as I can and that involves not lying anymore.

Chris: At my funeral I want people who really know me to be there. In other words, I want them to know that I was a straight-up I was a lesbian and that I had love in my life.

At the same time, accepting one's sexuality does not mean giving up one's sexual morality, even if it means giving up practicing their religion within the Mormon Church.

Daisy Jane: Around age 40...is where you're kind of finally so done with trying everything else that you just, I've met a lot of people that like me who are just done and we just want to live an authentic life...even if that means leaving that Church. But I also know that it's hard to find people to date like I'm talking about. It's hard finding people because I'm immersed in an LDS culture and society and finding good people, there are a lot of immoral people that would have a one-night stand for less than a dollar, but really good genuine gay people in Utah. I know that's such an oxymoron, but it is hard. It is difficult.

Living honestly and authentically unfortunately does not mean that family and community will be accepting.

Quinn: I guess something that shocks me is that you guys I'm still the same person that you loved before, now I'm just being a more honest, authentic version of myself and that's not ok.

In addition to honesty and authenticity, women seek happiness and peace. They seek what makes them happy, not what they are told should make them happy. Nicole received a confirmation to her prayer that God just wants her to be happy. She felt this gave her permission to pursue a same-sex relationship. Women must consider what

provides long-term peace and on what path happiness lies. Women may try one path, such as continuing to adhere to religious principles or engaging in same-sex relationships; if that path does not bring happiness, they will reassess their decisions and possibly consider trying a different course.

Chris: I want to be happy and I'm happy with a woman...when I go to church I'm miserable and isn't religion supposed to make you feel good?

The choice women make between activity within the Mormon Church and having a same-sex relationship may change in their future. After hiding from her sexuality for so long, Andie felt relief when she allowed herself to live the lesbian "lifestyle." At the same time, pressure built again because she continued to firmly hold her beliefs in the Mormon Church and yet was not living her life in accordance to those standards. She now holds both a Mormon and lesbian identity, while living a celibate Mormon lifestyle. Other women found their happiness within same-sex relationships and not within strict adherence to religious practices.

Quinn: Was I going to accept it or reject it within myself and would I tow that Church line of okay well you could be lesbian, but you should remain celibate? I thought, "Men are that they might have joy" which to me being celibate is not a life of joy. And then I would think about the highest level of exaltation is with a man and a woman and that just was not my idea of eternal exaltation. I would rather be with my current partner as a ministering angel then in the highest degree of the celestial kingdom with a man.

Rebecca: I think spirituality comes from within. Spirituality is something that you need to find peace with yourself. I think my goal is to find peace with who I am right now and unfortunately that's not part of the gospel. That's something that I'm going to have to find peace with myself. And it's probably going to hurt some, some people but I got to find that peace before I end up being this 80-year-old person who's never happy. I want to have that. What is it that they say... "Adam felt that men might be. Men are that they might have joy." Well I would like to find my joy. So I mean I really would. Even if it's just here on earth I guess.



Several women, such as Rebecca, fought for years against their same-sex sexuality before finally experienced peace and happiness when they allowed themselves to be in an intimate and sexual relationship with the women that they loved. Rebecca finally came to a place in her life where she felt that was worth it enough to pursue peace. Other women, even in the face of loss, pursued their happiness.

Farah: The things I was most afraid of, other than the lightning, did happen. Did lose friends, did lose my church community, my family disappeared for 4 years, so did Lily's. But even in the face of those losses, my happiness was finally able to come to the surface and I knew if I'm feeling this, even with those losses, then this is where I'm supposed to be.

Holly: But it's been the best thing that has ever happened. Lori and I are happier and closer than we've ever been and we are so thankful every day that we did finally come out and just say to hell with the Church and we've had enough and our happiness is important and so it's the best thing that I ever did.

## **Reconciliation Process**

Multiple components exist to the reconciliation process. Women must reconcile their sexuality with their religious identity and their religious beliefs with their experiences. Women must also reconcile their relationships to the Mormon Church and with God.

### **Reconciling Sexuality with Religious Identity**

To reconcile sexuality with religious identity, one must first come to an acceptance of same-sex sexuality. Women may run from their sexual orientation for years or decades. They may hold onto the shame and guilt they experience because of their attractions. Whether or not women choose to act on their same-sex sexuality they

need to accept it as part of who they are and that experiencing same-sex sexuality does not make them inherently evil.

Samantha: I don't beat myself up anymore about thinking what a freak I am or anything because I just, I feel like for whatever reason this is how I am.

Daisy Jane: I'm dating a girl and it makes me happy. I love it. It just is awesome because it feels right, like it always has, but I'm not hating myself anymore for it. And I'm not feeling ashamed, when I going to church I don't feel ashamed.

Accepting one's sexual orientation does not mean that women will identify as a sexual minority or pursue same-sex relationships. Women can then either accept the religious beliefs that acting on their same-sex sexuality is morally wrong, redefine previous beliefs while maintaining their religious identity, or completely reject their previous religious beliefs and identity.

Andie and Samantha both acknowledge their same-sex sexuality while retaining their Mormon identity and actively practice the Mormon religion. They choose to honor their religious beliefs by remaining celibate in order to remain in good standing in the LDS Church. While they both accept their sexual orientation, they also do not view their orientation as a permanent part of their eternal identity. To maintain their path, they maintain their focus on religious goals.

Samantha: I worry a lot about the Scripture that says, "As a man thinkest so is he." So I think if I dwell on the thoughts that I'm having too much, then I'm in trouble. So I try, I don't want to entertain the thoughts that I'm having sometimes so and then sometimes I just don't care. And that's usually the time that I end up having a problem with masturbation. But most of the time I usually try to control my thoughts.

Most women who retain their religious identity attempt to balance that identity with their sexual identity. This might be one of the more difficult choices because there is some inherent conflict between the two. Women who hold both identities may always

experience conflict to some extent, but that does not mean they should choose one identity over the other.

Daisy Jane: Right now it's important to me to be active in the Church. In going into my new ward I talked to my bishop and my Relief Society president and just said this is the deal, I'm not in a relationship right now and but I'm not saying that I won't be and I told them that it's a beautiful thing to me to be in a relationship with a woman and I love the Church. I love the doctrine. I love the gospel. And my bishop called me to teach gospel doctrine and I said okay but when I get a girlfriend things will need to change. And they've been really good. I don't know how it will be when I bring the girl to church...but at least I'm not hiding anymore and they're accepting that right now. I don't know how long that will last.

Stargays: I think it's depending on the situation. Some days I'm more spiritual and more religious than I am other days, certainly other days I'm more gay, than I am religious. I mean it just, it depends. I think it's completely subjective. But I don't know that I'd consciously make a determination between the two, does that make sense. They just both are. They both exist. They have to. I have to have them both here. And so I just deal with the balance. I mean I don't know how else to explain it. I know that sounds weird, but I wouldn't know anything different.

Aidan: I'm in this odd juxtaposition where I defend gays and lesbians and bi and trans people to Mormons, and I defend Mormons to non-Mormons. And that is an odd position because somebody was asking me just earlier today, 'And you're still Mormon and your gay?' Yeah. There are good things about being Mormon. One of them is being family oriented. I just want to change the definition of family to include me. So I'm still very much Mormon, even if I go to other churches. I'm still very much Mormon. I'm never going to escape that.

Many women appear able to stay within this space of balancing both identities because one simply cannot be given up for the other. Some women tried balancing both, but due to the difficulty gave up on the Mormon Church.

Ellen: And so I tried to do, I tried to do both for a little while but eventually I felt too guilty to keep going to church I felt like I was lying because you can't have a calling in the Church if you are doing things that you are not supposed to be doing so I eventually went to my bishop and said that I couldn't be a teacher anymore and I needed him to release me from my calling cause I was dating a woman. And so I eventually just stopped going to church altogether.

## Reconciling Religious Beliefs

Experiencing same-sex sexuality often causes one to reconsider religious beliefs. This is a significant experience as it means challenging one's worldview or paradigm. Stepping outside of the comfort of a known belief system means stepping into the unknown and losing the certainty that they once held due to firmly established religious beliefs.

Quinn: You feel like you're kind of stepping off the edge of a cliff and you don't know if you're going to land anywhere. But I think you have to step off anyway and just find out. And so that's what I felt like I did, I stepped off a cliff and I was like oh okay I'm redefining and re-examining who I am in my faith and everything else, but it fits.

Many women reconcile their beliefs by changing those beliefs. Sometimes they change only a few beliefs, such as the morality of same-sex sexuality, other times they change their entire belief system. They strip away previous indoctrinated beliefs and re-establish new beliefs. This is difficult when one has been trained from a young age what and how to believe.

Ellen: I did a lot of cognitive mental retraining of the things that I believed in.

Kathryn: So it was really just stripping away those layers of belief until I didn't know what I believed. And I started with just this little pea of belief and started adding what I really believed to it.

Women may experience some aspects of belief as harder to reconcile than others. Women do not hold the same strength of belief in all aspects of Mormon doctrine. If a woman does not fully believe in a certain teaching, it is easier to give up that belief. For example, Barbarella found it very easy to relinquish the belief that Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormon religion, was a divinely inspired prophet because she never fully believed in it.

Other beliefs cling tightly and at best can be temporarily ignored, as they do not diminish. Andie tried to set her beliefs to the side when she lived in a partnership with another woman, but could only do so periodically. Despite being happy with her partner and her life and not being able to see herself living otherwise, her desire to live within the LDS Church continued to resurface because her belief in the Mormon religion always remained.

Sometimes it takes time and distance from the Mormon religion before a woman can challenge her beliefs because the beliefs have been so culturally engrained that it becomes difficult to look at them critically without becoming emotionally overwhelmed. Some women choose not to think about their religious beliefs as they live their lives as a sexual minority. Even while feeling confident in their sexual orientation, religion remains a difficult subject.

Chris: It's so hard to talk about religion that I just kind of push it out of my thoughts a lot. Which is weird because...I used to be so engrossed in it. I used to be totally encompassed in it. But now it's like, it's like going to a rattlesnake and it keeps biting you and you keep thinking it is going to feel good when it bites you...I don't know what I feel about religion now, but I know that it for me that just doesn't seem right to feel so scared at church.

Some women hold onto general values taught by the LDS Church, while giving up beliefs in specific doctrine.

Kathryn: But as far as reconciling my beliefs, I just try to hold onto what's being a good person, so having integrity at work, being honest, being kind, looking at other people with empathy. So those are all things I think I learned from the LDS Church that I have reconciled and maintained in my life, but most of their beliefs I would say are not my beliefs.

Holly: What do I believe? Not a whole lot is left that I believe. I think probably some of the moral things maybe, not really the Church's teachings, like some of the things that I think are good are kind of more the service type of things or how the Church always encourages you to do service and all of that, you know, love one another. Some of the things that you would, that I learned in church I still

believe that I think are still kind of truths across the board no matter what religion you are in, just the moral, the moral parts of the Church I think I still hold onto pretty strongly. But the parts about Joseph Smith, or the parts about what the afterlife is going to be like, or The Book of Mormon, or The Doctrine and Covenants, or any of those kind of things I don't believe in.

Daisy Jane, on the other hand, retains her belief in much of the belief system and scriptures of the LDS Church, but has distanced herself from the doctrine that does not make sense to her. She uses the infrastructure of the Church as a means to her spiritual end.

Daisy Jane: I don't understand man plus woman equals eternal joy and forever families, that doesn't make sense to me. I don't get it. But, I believe that the fundamental principle is important, you know love at home. I think that it's great when there can be functional family whether that's two women together, two men, a man and woman. I think it's important to have God in the home and spirituality. And the Church offers me, the Mormon religion offers me an organized way to worship the way that I've been raised.

### Reconciling with the Mormon Church

Although spiritual beliefs and religious identity intertwine, there exist two separate components to this part of the reconciliation process. Women may change some of their beliefs, but not their religious identity. They may also change their religious identity, but hold the same spiritual beliefs. Women not only need to reconcile their beliefs, but also their relationship with the Church. If they continue to believe in the Mormon religion, they must decide whether or not to live a Mormon lifestyle and how active to be within the Church. Women may choose to practice parts of the religion.

Quinn: I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't drink coffee. The only thing that has really changed in my life is that I'm lesbian and I don't live the law of chastity according to the Church.

Aidan: I'm as active [in the Mormon religion] as I can be, without completely compromising my own need to still be a lesbian.

Some women separate their spiritual beliefs from the Mormon religion. Women may believe the doctrine of the Mormon religion, but view the institution that is the Mormon Church to be flawed.

Stargays: Here's the thing okay everything has a lifecycle. Everything. Whether that's a star a few thousand light years from here or the rock outside the door, everything has a life cycle. And I firmly believe that the Church does as well. So the Church is the infrastructure that gives the gospel its ability to function and exist and provide the support and services to people it does... and one of things that separates the Church from every other Christian religion or religion in general that exists out there, the reason why we have modern day revelation is to set us apart so that we can fix things that we misunderstand.

About half of the women in this study do not want a relationship with the Church. Due to their experiences, their reconciliation process included disconnecting completely from the Mormon Church.

Irene: Now I look at this and it's just so black and white. It's just so easy I think when you're, when you're in the Church and involved in it it's easy to say that it's the only true church and those poor suckers that aren't privy to this information. That doesn't make sense to me though. Now when I look at it I think and question a little bit, it doesn't make sense that there's an ultimatum of sorts for everyone. I don't think that's the way a loving God would work, certainly not a creator who creates such diversity. It just doesn't sit well with me. Because were not all cookie-cutter you know and that, and even numerically I mean statistically really the number of members of the Church are like a drop in a huge bucket and yet to say well all the rest are you know are problematic, that doesn't make sense anymore.

Kathryn: The experience with the bishop saying, 'oh good I'm so glad this is behind us,' kind of turned me off of really reconciling with the Mormon Church, but right after I left the Church I, there was a group that used to get together...it was all LDS people who were all gay....And so I tried that, but you know really felt like they were just having church, only not calling it church...Me and my mother went to one of their lecturers and they had an opening prayer and an opening song. It was like going to church. I just, I don't miss church. So that wasn't hard to give up you know to discover that I could go shopping on Sunday was a glorious thing.

Lynn: Now that I'm on the other side of that I mean I don't regret it. I won't go back to the Mormon Church for anything. I think just because I don't believe it. Like even if they were to change their position on gays and become completely

accepting of them, I don't think I would go back. But yeah, it was difficult I mean it took a lot of vacillating back and forth between should I stay, should I go, and then ultimately I just, I just sat down and reasoned that why am I going to a church where I come back every Sunday feeling worse than I did before I came and feeling like a worthless piece of shit on some Sundays and feeling horrible about myself.

## Reconciling with God

Whether a woman chooses to remain in the Mormon Church, to practice another religion, or to forgo religion all together involves the process of reconciling her beliefs about God. The Mormon religion may have taught women to view or understand God a certain way, as a god condemning of same-sex sexuality. In order to release themselves from the guilt and shame, they needed to alter their beliefs about God. Daisy Jane, for years, felt unable to even go to God in prayer about her same-sex sexuality. She believed that she had to hide this aspect of herself from God. She, like many others, challenged her beliefs about God's nature.

Daisy Jane: And I went to clean the Temple here one night and I kind of had my conversation with God in the Temple. I'm kind of like okay you know that I'm gay right and I'm in the Temple so if you're going to destroy me just send a lightening bolt now. If not, I'm coming back here, until I'm not. I know that if I'm sexually involved with the woman I can't have my temple recommend. I understand that. There's nothing that I can do to change that.

Jessica: I'd like to believe in aspects of it like I need like to believe that we all would go to heaven, but I guess I don't believe that God is so judgmental. I physically cannot allow myself to believe that. I don't know it's just, honestly I don't let myself think about it a lot because I'm very conflicted on the matter.

Stargays: So it's sometimes difficult to think about that and to deal it that. And maybe I'm deluding myself I don't know but I also think that there is, I think God in the end is a much kinder, much gentler being that most of us humans would want him to be towards people that we want to be punished for the way that they are not behaving that we think that they should be, or they've been mean to us...And I think that He's way past all of that. I think He's going to be radically different to deal with then I think most people want him to be. So in my mind I



get where my family's coming from and I get where the Mormon community is coming from, but I have a hard time thinking that God is that cruel.

Ellen: And there were times that I was reminded maybe how much I believed in it and how I should change my life, but eventually it came to a point where I thought, if this Church is true then why did God make me this way. God wouldn't do this to a person. God wouldn't say that the most important thing in life is to marry someone in the Temple and have children and then make you love women and incapable of having love for man.

Aidan: I don't know how it all works, but I think that there have always been people in history more physically and/or emotionally comfortable with someone of their own sex, have sex with someone or not. And so I think there have always been those people. And someday I am hoping that God will tell us a way to account for that. I'm hoping that there's some way that that won't be counted against us because God will know our lifetimes and our social and cultural circumstances and that we were trying to be as good and as Christian as possible.

Rebecca demonstrates this process of reconciliation between her first and second interview. In the first interview, she still struggled with her same-sexuality and why God created her as He did.

Rebecca: I know God exists. I know that He's real. I know that we, there is a savior for us. I just don't understand why we would, why we have these issues if it's so wrong. Does that make sense? So that's hard for me to understand.

By the second interview, Rebecca felt more confident in her same-sex sexuality. She no longer experienced the same fear of condemnation. She now separates out her belief of God from her previous religious beliefs.

Rebecca: I believe that God loves me even though that I'm in love with the woman. I believe that God is more understanding than we understand, that's what I think. I do believe that we do have a Heavenly Father. I still believe that we have a Savior, but I don't think I'm going to be condemned because I chose a relationship with a woman. It doesn't make me a bad person because I am...I feel like the Church has made me feel like I am horrible for having these thoughts, feelings or being attracted to a woman. I mean I have been attracted to women and since I was young, since I was 12. So I always felt like I wasn't good enough, that I wasn't I don't know a good daughter of our Heavenly Father I guess. But it doesn't mean, doesn't mean I'm not. I still serve people. I still, I don't think it changed the core beliefs inside of me, but as for believing the Church as the

number one ultimate church, no I don't believe that anymore. I believe Heavenly Father loves us no matter what, no matter what gender we're with.

Quinn believes that God created her this way.

Quinn: I think that you know that God made each of us and we're created in his image and there's a reason why, we may not understand the reason why we were given this innate characteristic. I don't believe that it was given to us as a trial and I do believe that He's loving and He's just and that He'll work it out in the end. And what my responsibility is, is to hold onto my faith and my spirituality. But I don't think He's going to say you're going to hell because you are gay.

For Barbarella, her reconciliation came as she relinquished her belief in a god.

Barbarella: I kind of feel like for my whole life God is always in my head. And it was always like this second voice or this thing sort of telling me what to do or guiding me or judging me and/or disappointed you know. And I at one point felt like I removed God. And I felt very relieved because it sort of felt like for the first time in my life that the only voice in my head was my voice. And for me that was very comforting...to actually move on to this idea that after this life there's probably nothing is actually really comforting because if there is something and if the Mormon Church is true, I am fucked and I don't really need that in my head like I don't really need that belief. And this idea of it just being done, like really being done is kind of great because it enables me to really live my life right now.

### **Barriers to Reconciliation**

Some barriers to the reconciliation process exist. A few of the barriers that came out in this study include black-and-white thinking, ideals of perfectionism, and lack of family support.

I presented issues related to family support earlier in this chapter in the section on families. As discussed, the lack of family support often caused women to attempt to conform to family expectations even at their own detriment and to remain in a stage of confusion, struggle, and self-hatred due to fear of losing their family if they accepted their same-sex sexuality. In order to overcome this barrier, women needed to place their needs and happiness above that of their family. This might mean disconnecting

somewhat from their family of origin, a potentially painful process in and of itself.

Women usually reached this stage after discovering that living their lives for their family actually made them resentful of their family. This process may damage relationships and, thus, the relationships may require repair and healing.

Many women experienced black and white thinking. This is due, at least in part, to how the Mormon Church indoctrinates their members. The leadership of the Church teaches that the LDS Church is either True or it is not True, either all or nothing. One cannot accept some beliefs and not others without completely invalidating the premise of Mormon religious doctrine. For this reason, many women choose to abandon the LDS Church completely. Overcoming this barrier may mean allowing oneself permission to challenge this dualistic way of thinking.

Several women (such as Chris, Daisy Jane, Lynn) believed they had to be perfect which meant living everything according to the letter of the Church. They believed that being perfect would save them from or cure them of their same-sex feelings. Both Ellen and Jessica described themselves as perfectionistic. Perfectionism may represent a personality trait, but it also comes from the religious belief that the purpose of this life is to strive toward perfection, as defined by the Mormon religion, in order obtain rewards in Heaven. In order to overcome this barrier, women had to redefine what "perfect" meant to them and no longer strive toward the goals of other people's idea of perfection.

Daisy Jane: I'm not forcing perfection to rid myself of things I think are imperfect about me. I'm just accepting and to me it's a higher level of spirituality, it's more Christ-like.

## Anger

Because of the difficulty of the reconciliation process, many women experienced anger at some stage during their process. Jessica felt very angry in her teenage years as she sorted through her identity issues. Barbarella stated she is currently in an angry stage. Not everyone experiences anger to the same extent. Kathryn thought that she would feel more anger than she did. Anger might be directed toward the Mormon Church or God.

Daisy Jane: I just had it out with God really. I was mad at Him that for the way I felt, for the feelings I had, for them not making sense in the world I live in. That I don't, I can't fit in anywhere.

Women move through their anger as they continue in the reconciliation process.

Olivia: For a while I held the Church as that demon, that thing that's trying to hold me back and everything about it is awful. And I've come to realize, like there is still so much good that the Church does no matter how much you dislike religion and dislike the Church, the LDS Church specifically. You can't deny the amazing thing, like the humanitarian work that they do or the way that they improve their communities. The things they do for individual people is amazing. And there is so much good there. But I don't believe anymore that it is the only way to find good and that their doctrine is all knowing, the only right way.

Holly: I went from this point of absolutely hating the Church and just feeling very angry...To now I've kind of got more of a balanced view of like well these things were good for me when I was growing up...And I can say the things that I think are wrong and that are hurtful to people and that aren't good. But it's taken me a few years to get there probably only in the last couple of years have I really gotten there.

Not all women experience anger at the LDS Church or at God.

Farah: I always told people I never felt the urge to turn around and cast barbs at my religion like some people do. They feel so slighted by their faith and the way that it stunted them that they then want to break it to pieces. I didn't want to do that. I'm like this is still a great vehicle for my family, well now I don't think so. I believe people are in the vehicle that they choose and that they need to be in for their own growth and their own benefit. As far as the best vehicle, no because that vehicle is what has created so much pain and agony for them in the case of children who are different. How many men and women I guess, but mostly men, have committed suicide because their family simply had no way to come to grips.

Thanks faith for that. So I don't hate the Church, but I really think it's got a lot to think about. And yes there are times that I'm like oh my God how can you keep doing this to people.

## **Healing**

Most women need time to heal from the many traumas that they experience due to this phenomenon. Even after women have reconciled their identities, they still may need to heal from the wounds that they received during the process.

Parker: I'm in a very healing state and I'm in a very repairing a life of what I think was religious abuse and I really don't want anything to do with [religion] on any level, but spiritually I'm always seeking.

The reconciliation process involves multiple components and women experience different outcomes. The question still remains, how do women reconcile their identities? Reconciliation is an active process. It takes time. Personal experience appears to be the primary motivator in directing women toward the choices of how to identify and how to live their life. The first step involves choosing to live.

Daisy Jane: Okay this is what I've decided. I'm going to learn to live and not die from it and I think I was dying from it for all of my life.

## **Talking About Sexuality**

Because same-sex sexuality represents a taboo subject, women often suffer in silence. In order to work through the pain, women need to not hide their experiences anymore. Just talking about one's sexuality and processing experiences leads women toward figuring out what it all means. After sometimes years of not talking to anyone about it, women feel the need to share their experiences. Women experienced talking about their sexuality in a safe environment as freeing. Having another person know how

one feels helps. As part of Kathryn's process, her counselor gave her the challenge to just tell one person. Daisy Jane went to God in prayer and received the answer that she needed to talk about it, that it was time for it to be out in the open.

Daisy Jane: I started voicing and, and I guess essentially like in a way coming out. But for me it was just, I just had to get it out. I had to not let it have power over me anymore. I had to be at peace with it. And so for me that meant talking about it, talking with my family about it.

Heidi: The first time I kind of said it out loud...that's when I started to kind of own it a bit more. And it was like you know I feel like I could kind of start talking about this and be okay with this and accepting this is who I am.

Rebecca: First being vocal about it. I mean not like going out and having gay rights movements or anything like that, but if somebody asked me if I'm...attracted to females, I'll say yeah I am.

Ellen: I'm comfortable in my skin right now...that started with when I was 22 when I started getting involved in the gay club on campus and came out to the world for the very first time. It felt really freeing.

## Support

Women need support as they attempt to understand their identity, as they figure out what it means to their lives, and how it will affect their religious identity. Some women received outside support. Support came from mentors, school personnel, friends, and sometimes strangers found online. Women needed support both for their same-sex sexuality and support to remain an active member of the LDS Church if that is their desire. Support does not mean pushing one toward a specific outcome. Rather, women need support for self-acceptance. Having a supportive environment makes the process less traumatizing. Parker describes what she calls the "critical support" that she received.

Parker: It was different people, but it was at different points. So at one point a therapist who was not Mormon. She was the person I was seeing for different reasons related to my relationship with my ex-husband and then I just came out to

her and she was a vital support...A sister of mine who was supportive and helped my family, actually 2 of my sisters, one more than the other, but both of them were vital. And just other friends who, there were friends who I lost, but there are other friends who were supportive and encouraging. And someone I haven't even had any association with but who has been a real critical support to my mom, which has helped my relationship to my mom. That's my mom's sister, my aunt. She's a therapist who has more or less helped my mom with the conflict that my mom has. So even though I don't have much of a relationship with my aunt, her support with my mom has also been critical. So just little pieces, little pieces along the way where there were people and opportunities that just allowed me to have the strength to come out and to be out.

Kathryn: I guess it is sad that I needed to so much reassurance, but that's what I needed at the time is just lots of people who looked at me and knew who I was and thought that was cool and then eventually I got to that point too.

Olivia: I found the people that could accept me for who I am and who I was and who loved me for more than just my mask, that there was something below the mask to even love in the first place.

Not everyone receives such critical support. Some go through the process fairly alone. While this might be more difficult, supporting oneself is essential.

Jessica: I'm not a very confident person in general, but I am confident in the fact that I like girls and that I deserve a good relationship with one. That hasn't happened yet...I just gradually got used to the idea and I don't know I'm sure a lot, a whole host of other issues will come up when I have like if I get a relationship with someone. But for the time being I'm like, I know that I'm gay and I'm okay with it...like I didn't have a lot of outward support it was a lot of just me giving myself pep talks and just trying to I don't know just doing the best I can. A lot of just like mind over matter I guess. Like willing myself to be okay with it.

## **Self-Acceptance**

Regardless of how a woman ultimately identifies, the reconciliation process moves towards greater self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is also a process. Lynn gained self-acceptance when she stopped living up to other people's expectations, although it took her a long time to get to that point.

Kathryn: The contrast of what I had always been raised to be and what I knew I was, I couldn't reconcile it and the more I tried the more frustrated and more the self loathing escalated and that's when I started to try to medicate it with alcohol and making some really poor choices that way. But it really was just the contrast between what I had been raised to be and what I knew I was and it took me a long time to finally settle that and say okay what I was raised to be obviously this is who I am, I need to just set that aside and just take the good I can from my upbringing and let the rest go.

Stargays: [Basic training] taught me more than anything that I have to be okay with who I am, what I can accomplish. I know I'm better. I know I'm worth more and can do more than what anyone else has ever seen in me. So what people had to tell me at that point didn't matter. So it's kind of the same thing when people say you can exist in the same person, you can't believe in the Church and be Mormon and still be gay and still existed at two polar opposites. That's a lie. Because I won't listen to what other people tell me even though it's not popular. I don't care.

Heidi: I think if anything coming out taught me to accept myself and be more accepting and that's definitely how I feel when I came out like as bisexual also. It's like it's part of just accepting and trying to accept myself for who I am.

Accepting sexual orientation does not immediately change a woman's confidence level. Several women reported feeling a lack of confidence. Irene admires women she has met in the LGBT community because they appear confident and they truly accept themselves. Even though Irene has logically accepted she same-sex sexuality, she does not want to be lesbian. Like many others, she is in the process of learning to accept herself.

Quinn: So I'm just learning to continue to accept it if that makes sense.

Rebecca: I think all my depression stems from why do I have to experience. Why do I have to experience this imperfection? Does that make sense? To me I think I'm broken, but more and more each day I don't feel that. I'm starting to learn to accept it and make changes so that I can accept it.

Kathryn: Just learning how to quiet the negative voice in my head and replace it with something positive. So really not so much about gay, but about love your self. And then okay who are you? You are a lesbian woman. Okay then you are going to love that. So it was really the process of learning to look in the mirror and not go "ugh," but go this really you know I got some good stuff.



### Theoretical Sample

In preparation for this this research project, I conducted a pilot project interviewing four heterosexually identified Mormon women. In that project, we discussed their experiences with sexuality. All four women had engaged in sexual activity with a male prior to marriage. Thus, they too violated proscriptions of sexual morality rules dictated by their religion. My last question during the first interview I conducted revealed an unexpected response when I asked if there is there anything else that she would add or that she thought I should ask other people.

Shane: There's one thing that I've actually never told anybody, but since you are doing your, you know, this is your dissertation or whatever. It feels kind of weird to say it, so I'm making sure that everything is closed. Can you hear me if I talk more quietly?

Shane then went on to describe her experiences with same-sex sexuality. With the recommendation to ask other heterosexually identified women about same-sex sexuality, I incorporated this question into my interview guide of the pilot project. These four women did not experience conflict with their religious identity because of the same-sex sexuality they acknowledged; rather, their heterosexual activity began their process of challenging their identity as Mormon and their relationship with the LDS Church. It is beyond the scope of this project to provide a detailed analysis of how their sexuality affected their religious identity. Below I provide a composite of each of their responses to the question about their experiences with same-sex sexuality.

## Shane

Shane is a 30-year-old Caucasian female raised as a member of the LDS Church in California. At the age of 10, Shane remembers feeling attracted to a teenage girl. “Then after that like occasionally, not very often, but occasionally I’m attracted to a woman and I’ve never done anything about it really.”

Shane never really acknowledged these attractions to herself because she always felt more attracted to men. Shane feels grateful for her heterosexual attractions because she believes that society makes it harder those who experience same-sex attraction. Although always desirous of a heterosexual relationship, Shane found satisfaction in non-sexual intimate relationships with women. Just like the women in the main study, Shane received the message from her Mormon community that sex should only occur within a heterosexual marriage. Heterosexual activity outside of marriage felt scandalous. “The way like the Mormons treated sex between man and a woman like it almost left intimate moments between women almost more natural.”

Shane found it natural to hold her best friend’s hand and to cuddle on the couch, although, she never felt sexually attracted to her friend. She saw this behavior as no different than what she engaged in with her sisters. At the age of 20, she developed another close female friendship. Shane experienced sexual attraction toward this friend, although they only held hands. She states that they were close like a couple. So much so that her family thought the two actually might be in a romantic relationship. Shane’s mother came to her and said that if she came out as a lesbian they would still love her. When Shane realized that other people perceived their relationship this way, she felt that

the relationship was not appropriate in her opinion. Shane stopped talking to or seeing her friend. Her friend later came out as lesbian. She and Shane and her never reconnected. Shane went on to engage in heterosexual relationships. Shane eventually relinquished her Mormon identity due to her heterosexual activity. Her immediate family had already left the Church and supported her in her decision. Shane recently gave birth her first child with her husband.

### **Alice**

Alice is a 34-year-old Caucasian female raised in California within a strict Mormon family. She first stated that she had not experienced attractions toward the same-sex and that she did not know why she had not. Alice received many offers in her rebellious teenage years to have sex with a female friend and let a man watch. She turned down these invitations. In her late 20s after serving a mission, Alice married the non-Mormon man who got her pregnant. They have had somewhat of a tumultuous marriage, but she has remained committed to the relationship. They have had friends who engaged in open relationships and have talked about that possibility themselves. Her husband has encouraged her to have a girlfriend because she believes that every man's dream is to watch two women. At the advice of their friend who discouraged an open relationship because his experience was that it always ruined a good relationship, they have chosen to remain monogamous. Alice never really said what she thought about the idea of having a girlfriend. Alice admitted that when she watches an X-rated film with her husband she feels turned on seeing two women together. Alice continues to identify as Mormon and actively attends church.

**Bette**

Bette is a 28-year-old Caucasian female raised in an active Mormon family who lived in the Midwest for the majority of her youth. Bette recognized that she had some attractions towards other women while attending BYU. She has never had sex with a female, but she ended up kissing a woman one night. She brushed off the experience by telling herself that it only occurred because she had been drunk.

And then just the way that my life has panned out it has never been like a, I don't want to say issue. It's never brought itself up again at a point where I can give it attention.

Bette married a man she had met in college. Her marriage struggled due to issues her husband brought into the relationship. After having two children with him, she found sex with her husband felt like an obligation. She stated that she felt more drawn to seek comfort and affection from her female friends. She describes her relationship with one friend:

It's like we never did anything sexual, but we were always just physical. We'll always just cuddle. Even now when I see her we'll just, we need that physical proximity to each other and like I, it's weird because I will still get so much comfort and satisfaction from being like close to her and having her touch me and like touching her. Then I think I have ever gotten from [my husband].

Bette and her husband eventually divorced. During the divorce process she started dating another man, Zach, with whom she could develop the type of intimate, sexual relationship she never had with her first husband. While born into the Mormon Church, Zach had removed his name from the Church membership records. Some members of Bette's family struggled with the fact that he did not conform to their religious beliefs. During one Christmas when the family chose names for their traditional

gift exchange, Bette's sister-in-law removed herself and Bette's brother from the family event because she did not think the family should support Bette's relationship with Zach since he did not represent the type of Mormon male she believed that Bette should marry. Bette and Zach have since married and share a satisfying sexual relationship. Bette never had to analyze or define the meaning of her attractions towards women because of the development of her long-term heterosexual relationships. Bette no longer identifies as Mormon.

### **Jenny**

Jenny is a 32-year-old Caucasian female raised by an active Mormon family in a Salt Lake City Suburb in Utah. Jenny never experienced any attraction to the same-sex, but she appeared the most open to it.

I've never have [had any attractions toward women], but I've always felt like if it was somebody who really wanted to be with me and I felt safe with I probably could go there. But I've never really. I've never...I don't have that towards a lot of men either. So it's just kind of an interesting thing for me, I have to feel a strong connection to a person. So that's why I feel like I could, but I just haven't.

Jenny continues to identify as Mormon, but does not actively participate in the religion.

### **Tamara**

Tamara responded to the recruitment announcement for the current study. She met all criteria for inclusion. She identified as a lesbian Mormon woman. Tamara, however, was born a biological male.

Tamara is a 41-year-old Caucasian female-identified lesbian raised by active Mormons in a conservative area of California. Her story of religious and sexual identity intersects heavily with her gender identity. Before she could recognize her same-sex sexuality, she had to first recognize that her biological sex and assigned gender did not match the gender orientation and identity that she felt. It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss the intricacies of gender identity or accurately portray her gender identity formation or transition. The discussion of Tamara's story will remain focused on her same-sex sexuality as it relates to her female identity.

I suppose the first time that I came to the conclusion that I was lesbian....I was 19. Because of my LDS upbringing, I tended to really repress the whole transgendered thing, even though I crossed dressed almost constantly....But when I was 19, a moment of clarity occurred when a psych TA made light of one of her clients in class and of course it garnered a lot of laughter and I felt compelled to laugh along even though I was crying inside. It was the first time I heard a description that I could identify with and that was a lesbian trapped in a man's body.

Tamara did not identify strongly with the Mormon Church growing up. She attended church weekly because her family made her. Tamara immediately went inactive when she left her family home to go to college. Religious identity aside, she tried to conform to the gender expectations of her family and religious culture. Tamara became involved with a woman who converted to the Mormon religion after she started dating Tamara. During their courtship, Tamara became active in the LDS Church. The two got married.

I actually have two biological children and I'm their father obviously. So I spent 10 years with a woman, but I was her husband. Although the more I look back on it, it was more like I was the wife and she was the husband.

Tamara told her wife about her past history of cross-dressing, but they had both believed that this behavior was behind her. However, her gender orientation had not

changed. Tamara processed her gender identity in private journals that she kept in order to understand what her feelings meant. Her wife found and read the entries. This marked the beginning of the end of their relationship.

They tried marital therapy, but therapy did not work because Tamara's wife wanted to change Tamara not to mutually work on the issues each brought to the relationship. Tamara and her wife divorced. Tamara's therapist also parted ways when Tamara could no longer strive to be the good husband, father, and priesthood holder that therapist believed she should be. Tamara began taking testosterone blockers. She lost all family support. She sank into a deep depression. She became suicidal and one dark night spontaneously began making preparations to hang herself. Something stopped her from attempting. That night she knew that she had to start taking hormones and fully transition to female.

After Tamara began taking hormones, she experienced a period in life where she felt asexual. When her sexuality returned, she experienced some attractions for the first time towards men and realized she had some degree of sexual fluidity. She began dating a man with whom she now lives. While physically attracted to women, she can deal with her boyfriend because he communicates as a woman and also identifies as gender variant. She still identifies as a lesbian and longs to be in a relationship with another woman. Fulfilling this dream presents difficulty due to the transphobia many people hold and health issues that prevent her from pursuing other relationships. Tamara and her boyfriend remain together for the mutual care they provide each other.

The odd part of it is that because I'm trans the Church sees my relationship with him as a gay relationship, when in fact it is a heterosexual relationship. And if I were to get into a relationship with a woman they would see it as a heterosexual relationship, when it is in fact a lesbian relationship. So the whole idea of the

lesbian identity isn't even addressed via the Church. Whereas right now I'm in deep do-do if they decide to do something to me. If they decide to excommunicate me tomorrow, they can say well you're screwing a man, you're a man. Not to mention it's out of wedlock.

Her sexual orientation is subsumed in her gender identity. To others, she cannot possibly be a lesbian since to them she is a man. Tamara strongly believes in the gospel as taught by the LDS Church and would like to attend church, but the local Church leaders have told her that if she attends then she has to wear a suit, not a dress, and may not attend women's services.

Nowadays people have told me on numerous occasions go find another church. And I'm like I can't. I just can't do it. For example, if I were able to have surgery and I actually had surgery, I would be immediately excommunicated.

Tamara does not attend church because she does not want to be excommunicated and does not feel welcome in her ward. She wants her children to have a relationship with the Mormon Church; however, she does not push the Church on them because her parents tried to raise her that way and it caused her to rebel.

I would actually like them to have, to be active in the Mormon Church. I do believe in the gospel. I do not necessarily believe in the Mormon Church specifically, but I realized that the Mormon Church is the vehicle for the gospel and some don't understand the difference, but I think on the whole [that] is okay as long as they take certain things with a grain of salt... I don't want them to question every thing as that were, but I want them to think and question things as they come up and find their own answers. And if that means going away from the Church, then that means going away from the Church. I won't be happy with that, but it's their life and their choices.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This research study set out to explore the following research questions: What are Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality? How do Mormon women reconcile same-sex sexuality with their religious identity?

Factors that affect a woman's experience include family upbringing, personal testimony/belief or connection and attachment to religious identity, peer pressure, and culture. Factors that affect whether one decides to remain active in the Mormon Church include social supports, such as family, friends, and partners. Family plays a significant role in the reconciliation process based on a family's acceptance or rejection of the family member with same-sex sexuality. Families' reactions to same-sex sexuality depend on their beliefs and religiosity.

The findings section provided a comprehensive description of women's experiences. In this section, I discuss those experiences and how they relate to previous literature. I also present implications for counselors, support systems, families, ecclesiastical leaders and women who experience same-sex sexuality.

## Discussion of Themes

### Sexuality

The women in this study appear to conform to sexual identity development models of first becoming aware of attractions (recognition), exploring those attractions (understanding sexuality), accepting the identity label (coming out to self), and then internalizing that identity (Cass, 1979; Klein et al., 1985; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1989). Sexual identity formation theories ultimately result in acceptance of a sexual minority identity and integration of this identity into other aspects of a person's identity. Although women are in different stages of the identity formation process, all of the women in this study appeared to conform to this theoretical process.

Women who identified as lesbian stated that their primary romantic connections and emotional satisfaction were with women. Integration of identity means that one's sexual identity does not subsume all other identity statuses (Troiden, 1989). As time passes, women become more comfortable with their sexual identity. In the beginning, it may feel like it is everything.

Wendy: I mean cause the sum total of who I am isn't lesbian. I think it is an important part of who I am, but there's a lot of other things to me.

Understanding sexuality presents a difficult task when the community in which one lives considers sexuality, especially same-sex sexuality, taboo. Women, including heterosexual women, must wade through sexual stereotypes and judgments in order to understand their sexuality. The Mormon culture contributes to this suppression of sexuality, but so too does the larger American culture in which much of Mormon culture is impeded (Foucault, 1978). American culture disregards women's sexuality and focuses on male sexuality and male desire. Women are not expected to be sexual unless

as a sexual object for a man's pleasure. These cultural beliefs create additional barriers that delay a woman's recognition of her sexuality.

In order to reconcile one's sexuality with values and beliefs, one must first recognize their same-sex feelings. Only a minority of women initially recognized their feelings as sexual or romantic attraction. Most of the women in this study interpreted their feelings as a form of intense friendship or a universal experience that all women shared. Other researchers have noted sexual minorities development of romantic friendships in their youth (Diamond, 2002). There appears to be some basis for the universality of this belief as many heterosexually identified women appear to form romantic friendships (Blackwood, 2000), Shane from the pilot study being one example. Jessica pointed out that recognition is subjective due to how women interpret their feelings. For example, even after Quinn experienced a same-sex relationship in college, the loss of which devastated her for years, she did not realize until years later that this relationship represented her underlying sexual orientation.

As their sexuality continued to develop, some women begin to question their sexuality and the meaning of their experiences. Other women suppressed the question. They may project their disinterest in the other sex onto men. Some women, for example, projected their lack of heterosexual interest on to men. For Barbarella, this stemmed from a maladaptive belief that she used as a coping skill to protect her ego during a time when she did not have the capacity to challenge heterosexual norms.

Barbarella: I did have to sort of recognize the fact that I didn't want to be with [men]. And I had somehow probably most of my life mixed that up, turned that on to they didn't want to be with me because that was much less painful in a way. I mean it messed me up thinking that nobody wanted me or that I wasn't good enough, but that was better, that was safer than saying I'm gay and I, it's not okay. I'm a sinner and I'm going to hell and I'm really the problem, deep down there's

something wrong with me. And I got to say that there was something wrong with them because they weren't recognizing the good in me or what they were sort of missing out on.

The women in this study did not tend to have family or community support for understanding their sexuality or figuring out what their experiences with same-sex sexuality meant. All women in this study received the message, whether from family or culture, that sexual relations should only occur within a heterosexual marriage and same-sex behaviors equated to serious sin. Being the only limited information that women received about same-sex sexuality, experiencing same-sex sexuality appeared to lead to feelings of confusion, guilt, and shame.

Feelings of guilt and shame toward same-sex sexuality appear common among all women actively participating in Mormon religion. Women had no context to feel otherwise given the teachings of the LDS Church and the general homophobia in U.S. society. Most women at some point attempted to conform to "norm" of heterosexuality due to strong cultural pressure. Women lost their sense of self by hiding and putting on a pretense in the different worlds that they occupied.

Shame and guilt result from the messages that same-sex feelings are wrong and the internalized homophobia those messages create. Guilt and shame push one towards destruction or reconciliation. Negative messages came from family, friends, Church, general community, and therapists. This contributed to low self-esteem and confusion. Many women isolated themselves from the families and communities due to self-hatred and to protect self from negative environment, but this isolation is ultimately harmful because it cuts women off from their social supports.

Because women had little support in their family and Church community, women sought information from outside sources. Women need access to accurate and unbiased information about sexuality (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

Understanding her sexuality does not mean that a woman will identify as a sexual minority or engage in same-sex behaviors. The decision about how to act on sexuality represents a different choice associated with religious beliefs and values. A woman cannot make a healthy choice if she remains in a space of denial and/or hatred toward her sexuality.

Becoming aware of one's sexuality and then defining meaning takes time and presents a unique process for each individual. Defining sexuality can be difficult. Does one define oneself based on attractions, relationships, emotions, and/or behaviors? Researchers struggle to operationalize same-sex sexuality and who should be counted as a sexual minority (Diamond, 2008).

Most women appeared familiar with the Kinsey scale, at least to the point of understanding that sexuality is viewed on a continuum (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Although I did not ask women where they fit on this continuum, many women in this study viewed themselves largely toward the homosexual end of this spectrum.

When women have not engaged in significant relationships with either sex, they may question their sexuality in general. Jessica, Irene, and Wendy all questioned whether they could best define their sexuality as asexual. This leads one to consider the limitations of the Kinsey scale that dichotomizes homosexuality and heterosexuality and assumes that a stronger orientation toward one gender signifies a decreased orientation to the other gender. The Kinsey scale does not take into account asexuality. Other models

where heterosexuality and homosexuality are viewed on two different continuums and are compared to asexuality rather than an alternate form a sexuality may more accurately capture some women's experiences (Sell, 1997). However, questions about asexuality might arise due the repressive nature of society that does not allow women to connect with their sexuality, rather than to an actual asexual orientation for many women. Future research would be needed to investigate this.

As women recognize and acknowledge their same-sex sexuality, they appear to review the experiences in their lives. In hindsight, they interpret past experiences as evidence of their same-sex sexuality. Whether these interpretations accurately represent the past or are re-interpretations based on current understanding cannot be adequately gauged in a nonlongitudinal study. Sexual feelings for women felt normal or natural. This is the reason so many women who participated in this study pursued same-sex relationships. At the same time, their relationships did not follow a typical development pattern due to the concurrent process of trying to understand their sexuality in the context of their religious identity.

Women and their partners may delay defining romantic relationships because defining themselves in relation to their partners indicates some level of acceptance toward their same-sex sexuality. Even as women admit to being in love with their partner, accepting a nonheterosexual identity label has far reaching implications beyond the simple love toward this one particular person. When people in their social support system discover the relationship, women may experience pressure to end the relationship. Heterosexual couples do not tend to experience this burden in their relationship. The

pain of this sacrifice often goes unnoted. In fact, they have no support to deal with the heartbreak that they experience when they break up from a same-sex relationship.

Women's attempts to end a relationship during the limerence phase, a period of intense attachment associated with falling in love and the first couple of years of a romantic relationship (Tennov, 2001), may explain why certain women cycle in and out of a sexual relationship with their partner because they desire to maintain the emotional connection. Even if women stayed in a same-sex relationship, they may experience internal pressure from their religious beliefs and thus view the relationship as impermanent.

Andie: I knew even during this relationship, I always knew in the back of mind that it wouldn't last forever because at some point I wanted to go back to Church.

Many of the younger women in this study accepted a sexual minority identity prior to developing a same-sex relationship. Older women appeared more likely to ignore or suppress their sexuality until feeling towards another woman developed. This may represent a generational effect or it may be that younger women who follow the latter pattern of sexual discovery did not volunteer to participate in this study. Some evidence suggests that younger generations recognize and acknowledge their same-sex sexuality at younger ages due to a greater cultural acceptance of LGB individuals (Grov, Bimbi, NaniN, & Parsons, 2006).

Regardless of when women acknowledge their same-sex sexuality, dating presents another area of potential confusion because women do not have a script for how these relationships are supposed to develop. The Mormon Church sets up ample opportunities for single heterosexual members to meet each other. Many women in this study did not know how to find potential female partners. They had not been socialized

for any other type of dating experience. A few women felt as though they had arrested development because when they came out they had to refigure out how to date and where to place their sexual boundaries. They no longer fit the traditional dating script that leads to marriage prior to engaging in sex. Without this defined waiting period, women have to make choices about when to engage in sex and what sexual relations mean about the commitment to the relationship.

Chris: That's been my biggest thing trying to figure out the wrong way or the right way even to date. I've had a hard time even figuring out how to date because do you sleep together, do you not sleep together. You know, when do you do that. Ok if we had sex does that mean we're together now. And with men they just laugh when you say that. They're like no. And I'm like well it means something you know.

Chris, like many other women, no longer have support in finding a life partner, a process often celebrated in the Mormon culture. Several women stated that they did not know how to date or find potential dating partners. If women maintain certain Mormon values, beliefs, or lifestyle practices, such as not drinking alcohol, they may have greater difficulty finding a partner who also holds their values given the documented higher substance use in the LGBT community (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012).

Women reiterated the lack of support from their family and community in the development of healthy relationships. This enhances the potential for women to develop potentially self-destructive coping mechanisms. Ellen, Kathryn, and Holly turned to substance use and/or casual sex after the loss of their first same-sex relationship. They went from complete devotion to the Mormon religion, to loving a specific woman, to not having the woman or the Church. Left without mooring, they had to reconstruct self.



Many women accepted their sexual minority identity either upon allowing themselves to fully be in a relationship or after losing a relationship and having to decide how to proceed in their future romantic endeavors. Part of identity development may include seeking disconfirming evidence, such as dating males in order to prove their same-sex sexuality represents a general sexual orientation and not merely love toward one specific woman.

Not all women experienced a same-sex relationship prior to identifying as a sexual minority. For these women, they may try on the identity in safe spaces to see if it fits. According to Erikson (1980), people identify with pre-existing social identities. Many women did not receive accurate information about people with same-sex sexuality and for this reason felt that they could not identify with the LGB community. Knowing other people who identify as LGB leads to self-acceptance and confidence.

### **Sexual Fluidity**

While studies have shown women's fluidity in sexuality (Diamond, 2008; Peplau & Garnets, 2000), most of the women who volunteered for this research study reported being at the homosexual end of the sexual continuum. They did not feel that they had the ability to form a satisfying romantic heterosexual relationship. Most did not experience any attraction towards men despite their best efforts. This may be one reason they felt prompted to participate in this study.

The concept of sexual fluidity suggests that women could form attractions to males in accordance with their religious beliefs. The APA (2009) suggests that counselors should affirm all identities a woman holds, which may mean allowing a

woman to value her religious identity above an identity based on sexual orientation. Being able to have heterosexual relationships does not appear to influence a woman's same-sex feelings or desires. Four women tried marrying men in an attempt to overcome their same-sex sexuality; none of these relationships lasted. Lesbian women who had been in heterosexual relationships did not feel "right" in them. Not all women experience sufficient fluidity to conform to heterosexual expectations. The potential for sexual fluidity should not be used to push women toward a heterosexual relationship in attempts to value her religious identity.

Yet, fluidity seems apparent in a minority of women in this study. As shown with the four women from the pilot study who identified as heterosexual, same-sex sexuality is not limited to women who identify as a sexual minority. There appears to be this potential in many women, but most women never have to critically analyze their feelings because of the predominant heterosexual feelings and subsequent development of heterosexual relationships.

### **Acceptance of Same-Sex Sexuality**

In general, feelings of guilt and shame dissipated as women became more comfortable with their sexuality over time, although some women still experience periodic on-going negative feelings. Fighting against one's same-sex sexuality (including entering into heterosexual marriages) does not make either same-sex attractions nor the guilt and shame regarding them dissipate. Rather finding acceptance of one's sexuality as it is eliminates the negative feelings about being this way, whether or not one remains in the LDS Church. For the most part, the women who left the

Church reported that they no longer felt any guilt or shame about their sexuality. Women who retained their religious identity appeared to continue to struggle with the choice about whether or not to act on their sexuality. This leads women to consider whether to adopt the practice of celibacy or to engage in same-sex relationships. For those trying to live within the dictates of the religion, celibacy may represent a solution even while continuing to identify as a sexual minority. Celibacy is not the right option for everyone. One study suggests that refraining from sexuality activity may result in “significant unhappiness, loneliness, and isolation” (Hunter, 2010, p. 45).

Others chose to have same-sex relationships despite the religious proscriptions. A surprising number of women quoted the scripture from the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 2:25), “Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy” as their reason for engaging in same-sex relationships because neither celibacy nor a heterosexual relationship gave them joy.

### **Sexual Abuse**

I am sensitive about the topic of sexual abuse as it relates to same-sex sexuality given messages by the Mormon Church and some mental health practitioners that sexual abuse causes same-sex sexuality. Sexual abuse by male perpetrators may affect heterosexuality, but it is unclear how it affects same-sex sexuality

I did not ask every woman specifically about sexual abuse, but the issue surfaced in several interviews. Only one woman reported not having experienced sexual abuse. Fourteen, more than half of the participants, did not talk about this topic. It is unknown whether or not they too experienced abuse. Sadly, nine women reported being sexually

abused or exploited before the age of 18. The proportion of women who reported experiencing sexual abuse is more than the general population. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 12% of all girls under the age of 18 have been sexually abused (RAINN, 2009).

The majority of women who experience sexual abuse go on to identify as heterosexual. One theory that I propose for consideration is that some women with same-sex sexuality who are abused may suppress their heterosexuality; thus, they are more likely to experience their inherent same-sex sexuality. This is not to say that sexual abuse caused their same-sex sexuality, rather it may have interfered with any heterosexual inclinations that they may have had. The level of attraction towards women stayed the same.

The question that many people have, including some women in this study, is whether sexual abuse causes homosexuality. This is a difficult question to answer because of the high incidence of sexual assault among females in general. One woman noted that, at least in her case, the sexual abuse she experienced was a significant driver of her same-sex sexuality. She does not claim it is the only cause, but she does not know whether or not she would have become lesbian had she not experienced the abuse.

One meta-analysis conducted concluded that based on self-report data from 26 studies, "Compared with female sexual nonminority individuals, female sexual minority individuals were 1.5 times more likely to experience childhood sexual abuse...The mean of the absolute prevalence was 40.4% for bisexual females, 32.1%, for lesbian females, and 16.9% for heterosexual females" (Friedman & Morgan, 2009, p. 1483). The incidence in this sample is comparable to the rates found in the meta-analysis. Friedman

and Morgan go on to note that an association does not mean causation. They theorize that sexual minorities might be at higher risk of sexual abuse, rather than the abuse causing them to become attracted to their same sex. “It is important to note that organizations as diverse as the American Academy of Pediatrics and the US Department of Veteran Affairs have stated that sexual abuse does not cause individuals to become gay, lesbian, or bisexual” (p. 1492). While sexual abuse does not cause same-sexuality, it causes confusion when trying to understand sexuality. It may also cause other issues, like fear of intimacy, which then affect the quality of same-sex relationships.

### Religion

What is the Mormon view of the purpose of life? For Latter-day Saints, mortal existence is seen in the context of a great sweep of history, from a pre-earth life where the spirits of all mankind lived with Heavenly Father to a future life in His presence where continued growth, learning and improving will take place. Life on earth is regarded as a temporary state in which men and women are tried and tested — and where they gain experiences obtainable nowhere else. God knew humans would make mistakes, so He provided a Savior, Jesus Christ, who would take upon Himself the sins of the world. To members of the Church, physical death on earth is not an end but the beginning of the next step in God’s plan for His children. (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012b)

Taught since birth to believe in this purpose of life, women had no other context with which to understand their experiences. Only Judi converted. At age 16, she chose to go to BYU and surrounded herself with the Mormon view of the world. Thus, she too had the experience of being submersed in this belief system. For most, being born into this identity meant having to challenge the only religious beliefs they understood. Many of these women grew up in a very controlled world, whether or not they lived in Utah. The families that lived outside of highly populated Mormon communities could still shield their children from experiencing anything outside of Mormon beliefs by only

allowing them to engage in Church-sponsored social activities, as well as by allowing only Mormon influences into the home.

Farah: But I really believe that we grow up firmly brainwashed. I mean I think our parents of course mean well, most of the time, and our faith does, our religion. But children are sponges and that is played on. This is how you do things. This is what gets you rewards. This is what gets you punishment. And you grow up with that seeking a reward and not the punishment and then you start being your own reward and punishment. And that creates a huge conflict when you start to realize there are parts of me that don't fit with that picture.

For some Mormon women, experiencing same-sex sexuality shook the foundation of their belief. Taught to believe one way, their experiences of love contradicted this reality. Some women had already rejected their Mormon identity for other reasons and did not experience same-sex sexuality as against their moral beliefs. However, their culture and internalized homophobia still made accepting their same-sexuality a difficult process. These women had already experienced a reality shift when they relinquished their religious identity. When women experience positive feelings with same-sex sexuality, their religious beliefs now appeared incongruent with their sense of self. Same-sex sexuality triggered most women to question the essence of reality. The questions that presented themselves were: What is True? What is my true identity?

All the women in this study came to acknowledge their same-sex sexuality. Women then needed to fit this conclusion within their religious identity. Some women never questioned their religion. They believed and their belief has gotten stronger. To live faithfully to their beliefs, they practice celibacy. Other women find some way to balance both identities in part by taking the shame and guilt off of their sexual orientation and altering some previously held beliefs that condemned their acting on same-sex sexuality. Many in this category believe that while the doctrine is correct, the institution

of the LDS Church is not, or specific beliefs about sexuality within the Church will evolve. A few women put religious belief and activity to the side as they focus on finding fulfillment in a same-sex relationship. Others recognized they practiced the religion in order to please others because they wanted to be good. Half of the sample chose to leave the Mormon religion and no longer identify with the faith. Many could not remain within the Church because of issues related to their sexuality.

The sample in this study did not include enough converts to adequately theorize on the influence of converting rather than being raised with a Mormon identity. Judi, the only convert to Mormonism, questioned whether converts tried harder to reconcile and remain in the Church because they choose to belong to this religion rather than being born into it. I think the difficulty of giving up religion is not based on whether or not one chose to convert to the religion, but how strong one believes in the religion. The women born into the religion had different levels of belief and some found their beliefs easier to give up than others.

Being born into the religion most likely means that the family system is also part of the religion. Thus, these women face familial pressure to remain in the religion. A convert, on the other hand, may have a family support system that welcomes their departure from Mormonism. Future research could investigate differences between women born into a religion and women who convert to a religion.

Women struggled with other doctrinal beliefs, most commonly cited: polygamy, the status of women, the history of blacks not being able to hold the priesthood, and the Church's actions in legislating same-sex marriage. While the Mormon Church is known for its patriarchy, not every woman felt like a second class citizen in comparison to men,

although a few did. Several women in this sample had issues with being women in the Church prior to experiencing religious conflict with their sexuality. The official statement of the Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding women states that:

All women are daughters of a loving Heavenly Father. Women and men are equal in the sight of God...In the family, a wife and a husband form an equal partnership in leading and raising a family...Their vital and unique contribution to raising children is considered an important responsibility and a special privilege of equal importance to priesthood responsibilities. (2012b)

How a woman experienced being female in the LDS Church largely depends upon how others in her local congregation treat her and this varies among different wards and the lay authority in her area. All women felt the pressure that the Mormon culture places on females to be a mother and housewife, often described by the participants in this study as being soft spoken and demure. Many women felt like they failed to meet the “Molly Mormon homemaker” ideal. Being gay was only one issue in their failure to meet gendered expectations.

Several women compared the treatment of LGB individuals to the Church’s treatment of black individuals. Until the 1978, the Church did not allow black men to hold the priesthood and this meant black men could not hold leadership positions in the Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012b). Some women believed that the Church would eventually change its stance on same-sex relationships the same way it allowed black members into full membership. Other women believed that the Church would never change its stance towards homosexuality.

The recent actions of the Mormon Church in marriage propositions created conflict for several women. Many women believed that the Church should focus less on sexuality and more on other social ills that plague the community members like drugs and



poverty. The Church's stance on same-sex marriage has alienated women who technically live the standards of the Church. Mel who is happily married in a heterosexual marriage refuses to attend church not because of her sexuality, but because of their position on other people's sexuality. The Church is losing members like Mel who feel as though they must choose between their family or friends and the Church.

Mel: I have a friend who desperately wants to get married and he can't. And I talk to this friend and I see this friend and I can see the heartbreak in his eyes. I can see how he tries to be happy, but deep down inside there is a part of him that is dying. That he can't express the same feelings as other people in public and not be laughed at or ridiculed...I don't go because I can't look at my friend in the eye and say I totally support you and then go to church and listen to them say that he's disgusting because that's what they're doing. So I can't do both.

Some women lost their belief in the religion because of these social issues. Other women retained their belief in the religion with the recognition the men who lead the religion hold human fallibility. Regardless of one's beliefs in the LDS Church, most still held a level of respect for the religion and the community. Several women either stopped wearing their garments or took their name off the membership records of the Church because they felt it was the honorable action to take since they did not want to mock the religion or appear to be practicing something that they were not. Women who had gone through a temple ceremony called the endowment chose to stop wearing their garments, pieces of underclothing considered sacred and symbolic of promises they made to God, when they decided to engage in same-sex activity. In the Mormon religion, permanently taking off their garments signifies less devout religious practice and for some symbolized the process of taking off of the religion.

Parker: I knew that to have the relationship with, with Tina that I wanted to have that that wouldn't mesh with the commitments and the promises that I had made and so it was a conscious decision on my side to end those commitments and promises because I had no intention of keeping them. It probably sounds silly,

but in a way it was like the honorable thing to do. I mean I don't believe and I don't intend to believe and I'm not going to mock it and pretend so I'm officially ending it, I'm officially taking my participation away.

A few women addressed the concept of religious abuse defined by other people using religious threats to control their choices. Religious abuse may come from ecclesiastical leaders using their power and authority over women or it may come from family and community who threaten women with eternal consequences, such as families giving women the ultimatum to either choose their eternal family or their same-sex romantic relationship. Women felt abused by the religion due the constant threat of excommunication for deviating from allowed behavior and by the constant negative messages about same-sex sexuality that caused the women to develop shame, guilt, and self-hatred. Parker felt that religious abuse extended to her parents because she could see the pain and sorrow they felt, as they perceived their daughter breaking apart the eternal family, and then having their religion tell them to no longer support their daughter. This division of families is a significant source of pain and potentially breaks apart the family unit, the opposite of the LDS Church's stated goal of strengthening families (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1996).

The Mormon Church has power over the individual members. They can use that power to help individuals or harm them. There appears to be some disconnect between the teachings of the LDS Church and the way the members enact those beliefs. While general Christian doctrine teaches the values of love and nonjudgment, most of the women in this sample did not feel that from Church members.

## Spirituality

What does one do when they lose their religious identity, an identity that has been their entire life? Religious identity encompasses spirituality, but spirituality itself is not an identity. Mormon is an identity. Most women have at one point connected their spirituality to their religiosity because the Mormon religion specifically teaches that spirituality is shown through the devoutness in which people practice the religion. Because almost all of the women in this study grew up with the teachings of the Mormon religion, their spirituality became enmeshed with the practice of their religion. This is common among many religious traditions. Faith development includes learning to differentiate what one personally believes to be true from simply believing what any religion teaches (Fowler, 1991). For women who have grown up their whole lives in the Church and told exactly how to worship, dis-identifying with the religion is like leaving behind a map in order to travel down a different road.

For the women who chose to leave a religion that demonized their sexuality, most reported that their spirituality suffered. They recognized it as a deficit in their lives, yet few had been able to find another religion or spiritual outlet to fill that void. Much of this is due to the traumatization they experienced so that any participation in any religion triggers the negative emotions associated with their previous Mormon religious experiences.

Jessica: It's kind of like it's all or nothing for me because I grew up so devotedly religious...I don't really know where to go from here.

It appears to take time living outside of the religion before one is able to examine one's beliefs because of the subconscious fear of "what if they are right and I am wrong?" With time, however, women appear able to actively question their beliefs and

separate out what they personally believe from what the religious institution told them to believe.

Not identifying with a religion does not mean that a woman does not have spirituality. Spirituality is not limited to Mormon religious functions. Women found spirituality in nature, in their relationships, and in their work. Just like sexuality, spirituality develops in an on-going growth process. Kathryn describes spirituality “as an ever-changing entity.”

### Family

Family plays a central role in a woman’s experience with this phenomenon. Many women reported that part of the struggle between their religious beliefs and sexuality came because of actual or feared rejection by their families. The centrality of family dynamics in the psychological process of identity formation is understandable based on family-oriented doctrine of the Mormon Church. Not only do women have to grapple with the religious beliefs that acting on their same-sex sexuality could result in the potential loss of an eternal family, but there is also the very real threat of losing the support of and connection to one’s family in this life. Some women experienced family members who completely cut these women out of their lives. This experience is not unique to same-sex relationships. Bette, from the heterosexual pilot study, also experienced family rejection due her nonmarital sexual relationship with a non-Mormon boyfriend.

Family members did not react uniformly. A pattern of older brothers reacting with greater rejection appeared among this sample of women. Other siblings may in fact

be a source of support as a woman comes out. Having even one member of the family who is supportive can be a protective factor because that person can be a liaison with other members of the family.

A few women lost fathers in their earlier years and this appeared to intensify the fear that they would lose that promised eternal connection and the subsequent hope that they would see their loved one again. These women struggled with the belief that acting on their same-sex sexuality meant that they were “choosing” a current relationship with a female over their relationship with their eternal family and specifically with their deceased father. Women had both positive and negative experiences with living fathers.

Many women’s stories circled around their relationship with their mother and the desire to be accepted by her regardless of who they love. On numerous occasions, the participants in my study asked about my relationship with my mother and when I described her gracious acceptance of my partner and her somewhat reluctant acceptance of my sexuality, women wished that their relationship with their mother could be met with openness and nonjudgmental love. Despite strain in the mother-daughter relationship produced by a woman’s same-sex sexuality, most women did not provide evidence of a prior on-going negative relationship with their mothers—contradicting theories that a negative maternal relationship produces same-sex sexuality.

Research by the Family Acceptance Project (Ryan et al., 2010) has demonstrated that the more rejecting a family behaves towards a member with same-sex attraction, the higher risk that member has of developing negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality and suicide attempts, abusing substances, and engaging in high risk sexual activities. The Family Acceptance Project does not promote that families relinquish their

beliefs systems, but they do make recommendations to minimize the risk of negative outcomes associated with rejecting families. These recommendations include talking to the family member about their LGB identity, expressing affection when the family member comes out, supporting the LGB identity even when feeling uncomfortable, requiring other family members to treat the LGB individual with respect, connecting the family member with LGB supportive organizations, and allowing LGB friends and partners into the home. The Family Acceptance Project recently released a booklet geared toward those of the LDS faith, *Supportive Families, Health Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children* (Ryan & Rees, 2012).

Many in the LDS community have heralded this booklet as an important tool for LDS families. Because the booklet is directed specifically toward LDS families, it draws on language and instruction used by LDS Church leaders. At the same time, the recommendations made by the Family Acceptance project go directly against some of the direction that Dallin H. Oaks, a high ranking leader of the LDS Church, provides in the official Church statement regarding same-gender attraction. At what point does showing love cross the line into condoning behavior? Elder Oaks responds to the question about allowing a same-sex partner into the home:

That's a decision that needs to be made individually by the person responsible, calling upon the Lord for inspiration. I can imagine that in most circumstances the parents would say, 'Please don't do that. Don't put us into that position.' Surely if there are children in the home who would be influenced by this example, the answer would likely be that. There would also be other factors that would make that the likely answer. I can also imagine some circumstances in which it might be possible to say, 'Yes, come, but don't expect to stay overnight. Don't expect to be a lengthy house guest. Don't expect us to take you out and introduce you to our friends, or to deal with you in a public situation that would imply our

approval of your “partnership” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012c).

Relinquishing a Mormon identity is difficult in part due to the family dynamics involved. Having a parental figure leave the Church, made it easier for women to question their religious beliefs or decide to leave the Church. Regardless of family beliefs, women want their choices to be respected and not be asked to perpetuate dishonesty, such as hiding the fact that they no longer attend church services or identity as a sexual minority. Many women expressed the continued respect that they held for their family and their family’s beliefs and desired that respect to be reciprocated.

A paradox that revealed itself was in how women raised their own children. While forced and threatened to practice the Mormon religion by their families, they see religion as a personal matter that should be not be forced on or taken away from their children. They do not disparage the Mormon Church to their children for the negative experiences they went through; although, they do teach their children to accept and welcome of all types of individuals in church. They want to allow their children the freedom to choose what is right for them and even encouraged their children to continue to find acceptance in the Mormon Church, if they desired. While women often received the message from their families “you must choose between the Church (and in effect the family) and your love for a woman,” they gave their children the message that it is not an either/or decision. Women presented an openness and acceptance for their children’s choices, even if that means their children believe fully in the Church and condemn same-sex sexuality. This is more than the women’s families gave them.

Ironically, women wanted their children to make their own choices and did not want to steer them away from the Mormon Church. This appears to contradict the

Church's stance is that that gay parents will produce "unrighteous" children. Women who had come out to their children received love, acceptance, and support from their sons and daughters. All of the mothers in the study had children under the age of 18. How adult children would respond may be quite different because they have had time to become set in their beliefs.

Women will experience the struggle of identity regardless of whether or not their family provides support to them. Lacking family support appears to make the process more difficult. However, women will seek support and community from others who will provide it.

### Community

The theme of community repeated throughout most of the interviews, especially loss of community. Community creates a sense of belonging and connectedness with others. This is a double edge sword when one is a part of a community that rejects part of one's identity. For women raised in the Church, the majority of their community consisted of other Church members, including extended family. Most often coming out resulted in that loss of community and many women reported struggling to find a replacement. They found the LGBT community not as unified or intimate compared to the tight-knit responsiveness they had experienced in Mormon wards, pre-made communities that one could simply drop into and belong. Some women successfully built a community outside of the Mormon Church by developing one relationship at a time and creating their own person network of other individuals who also identify with the LGBT community.



Having a supportive community influences women's decisions about whether or not to remain in the Church and whether or not to come out. As women accept their same-sex sexuality, they begin to wonder if there is still a place that they can belong within the Mormon community. A few women attended events specifically designed for gay Mormons in an attempt to find others similar to themselves, to build community, and to understand how others balance or reconcile conflict between their identities.

Changes are occurring within the Mormon Church due to strong grassroots efforts led by heterosexual members who want their religion to be inclusive and welcoming. The LDS recently launched a new website [www.mormonsandgay.com](http://www.mormonsandgay.com). Some wards actively reach out to gay members and encourage them to participate without fear of reprisal for not living according to the Church's moral standards. One ward in San Francisco called an openly gay, although celibate, man to serve in a leadership position in order to demonstrate their inclusiveness. (See <http://mitchmayne.blogspot.com> for further information.) More discussions are occurring. People are coming out on all sides sharing their stories. Whereas some women grew up in an environment of sexual secrecy where they often felt as though they were the only one to have the experience of same-sex sexuality, the experience is no longer hidden in the closet for younger generations. Much of the resistance to same-sex sexuality comes from members of the Mormon community who do not know anyone who openly identifies as LGB. As more people come out, they break down stereotypes and Mormons learn that individuals with same-sex attraction are not perverts or child molesters, but daughters, sisters, and mothers.

Parker: People need to realize that they really do know someone who's gay and it's not what they're saying, it's not at all what they're saying. And my friends watch people respond as they go through the coming out process, and my neighbors, and people they need to know, they need even down here in Utah

County, they need to see and they need to be respectful and they need to, they need to mind their manners and be grown-up.

The conflict between religion and sexual identity is not unique to the Mormon religion. Our entire nation is in political battle over this issue. People express concern that allowing “gay rights” means that they are morally endorsing homosexual behavior and this will destroy the family.

Farah: People say they are trying to protect families by not letting gay people have marriage and I said do you realize that if I have a child and I don't have insurance, but Lily does that her insurance will not be able to cover our children. How is that protecting children? If you think this is a step that will prevent us from having children, people who love each other have families or are families.

Quinn: Feeling now for the first time in my life not just like a female minority, but a female lesbian minority. It's like wait a minute why shouldn't I be able to have the same tax rights and property rights as you? Why shouldn't I be able to visit and make decisions for my partner of who knows how many years in a hospital situation? Why am I all of the sudden a minority with less rights than someone who's not even a US citizen.

### Coming Out

Coming out is not a singular event. Women have multiple coming outs. They must come out as a sexual minority and some must come out as not Mormon, or no longer practicing the religion. Women first must come out to themselves and this means first accepting lesbian as a legitimate identity. This is an on-going process and women have different levels of personal acceptance. Women must then choose when and how to come out to family, friends, their religious community, and to society in general. The coming out process is never complete because others will continually assume heterosexuality unless she corrects them in their misperception due to heteronormative expectations.

Coming out is tied to relationships in that if a woman fears that coming out will jeopardize the relationship she may feel more reluctant to come out. If she believes that she will receive support, she may feel more willing to come out. The difficulty in coming out has to do with the fear of rejection. Before coming out, women need to be prepared for the losses they may incur.

### Mental Health

As shown in the findings section, conflict that women may experience between their religious identity and sexual orientation can produce negative mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, or exacerbate pre-existing mental illness. Some women may need medications to control anxiety and depression for the rest of their lives. Others go off medication when they accept their same-sex sexuality. The sample for this study appears consistent with previous research that found higher rates of mental health disorders in sexual minority populations compared to heterosexuals (Hughes, Haas, Razzano, Cassidy, & Matthews, 2000; King, Semlyen, Tai, Killaspy, Osborn, Popelyuk, & Nazareth, 2008; Meyer, 2003).

The disparities in mental health are most likely due to minority stress. Mormon women with same-sex sexuality experience microaggressions from their religious community that bombards them with negative messages about same-sex sexuality and heavily endorses heteronormative behaviors (Nadal et al., 2011). Friedman and Morgan (2009) hypothesize the higher incidence of sexual abuse experienced by sexual minorities also contributes the higher rates of negative mental health outcomes. This does mean that negative mental health outcomes are always associated with same-sex sexuality.

Resiliency of some women may mitigate the risk associated with a minority identity. Some studies have found no difference in mental health outcomes in LGB individuals as compared to a similar heterosexual sample (Hooker, 1993; Siegelman, 1979). Further implications for mental health practitioners will be discussed in its own section at the end of this chapter.

### Intersectionality

I framed this research study in the theoretical model of intersectionality hypothesizing that Mormon women would have a unique experience based on their gender and religion. Several women reported feeling like a second-class citizen in an institution that did not fully value them because of their gender and because of their sexuality. Gender identity also impacts the experience as shown in Aidan's and Tamara's stories. In both of their experiences, gender deviation caused some of their greatest stress and conflict with family and community. Throughout the interview process, other factors also intersected with these two dimensions such as health, mental health, disability, ethnicity, geographical location, and generational influences.

Health and mental health intersected with identity formation. Because of Nicole's mental health diagnosis, she felt other people dismissed or negated her feelings especially in regards to religion. This impacted her connection to her religious beliefs and her understanding of her sexuality. Jessica worries about how her disability will impact her ability to form a long-term partnership.

Jessica: I definitely feel like a second-class citizen and I just feel like no one will be interested in dating me because I am, I seem so helpless and I don't really know how to get out of that mold.

This sample did not include sufficient ethnic minorities to make any justifiable claims about how different ethnic identities impact their experience. Other studies have researched non-Mormon ethnic minorities coming out process and suggest that ethnic minorities have the added pressure to conform to their community expectations (Chung & Katayama, 1998; Greene, 2000; Masquesmay, 2003). The geographical location also intersects to create different contexts. Mormon Utah culture is a culture unique unto itself compared with Mormon culture in general. Women who lived outside of Utah may have had greater interactions with people outside of the Mormon religion and experienced different community pressures.

A woman's age and the subsequent generation in which she grew up also impacted her experience with same-sex sexuality in the Mormon Church. Context makes the difference in experience. Different generations experienced varying levels of acceptance in their communities, as well as in the Mormon Church itself. Many women point to the AIDS epidemic and the misunderstandings held by society in regards to AIDS and homosexuality, which further demonized their sexuality. Women over the age of 30 grew up when society as a whole did not talk about same-sex sexuality.

Andie: The messages that you get is you just don't talk about it. You don't talk about it. It stays hidden. It wasn't in the media like it is today.

Younger LDS women may have greater freedom to acknowledge their same sex sexuality due to the current US culture that creates a safer environment in which to come out. Although it could be possible that the younger women who chose to participate in this study do not represent their peer cohort in the religion and that younger women who struggle with their sexuality identity may not have volunteered.

## Reconciling

The need to reconcile connotes an inherent conflict. As shown, most women experience significant conflict between their religious identity and sexual orientation. Many women struggle with issues of guilt, shame, and self-hatred. While it seems to be an irreconcilable conflict between sexuality and spirituality, the pain pushes one toward reconciliation. One cannot remain in a state of constant suffering. The women in this study sought internal peace through acceptance of themselves in whatever manner provided them with the greatest amount of peace. So often it appears that the only way to reconcile this conflict is to choose to give up one aspect of one's self.

Andie: That's a tough decision. That's a big decision. And that is, I have respect for anybody who makes that choice because it is not easy. And I honestly feel that neither way is right. It's just simply that you have to get off the fence. You cannot stay on the fence and have one foot on each side. It will kill you... You cannot live that way. So eventually you do have to come down on one side or the other.

Most women felt this ultimatum. The LDS Church promulgates the black-and-white dichotomy of choices. Black-and-white thinking limits options. Honestly, when I first began conceptualizing this project I hoped to answer my question of how one makes the choice to remain a practicing and believing member of the Church or to leave behind one's faith. Making a choice to continue to identify as Mormon or identity as a sexual minority appears to signify some sort of reconciliation. What made the difference between people in regards to the choices that they made? I still do not have the answer. What factors predicted a woman's continued belief in the LDS Church? The following did not appear to be associated with how a woman identified and what she believed at the time of this study: having a strong testimony of Mormon theology, going on a mission, receiving endowments, being able to form romantic relationships with men, or falling in

love or forming relationships with other women. Although these factors have everything to do with the choices that women made along their journey, they did not clearly predict the destination. The reconciliation process involves more than one choice. Women constantly chose and vary their direction depending on their current circumstances, beliefs, and feelings. Experience changes all three of these aspects. The unique experiences that women have direct their choices.

Olivia: And I don't know, for a long time I just tried to smoosh both parts together. It's like well sure I don't believe in all of the anti-gay things that the Church believes in, but that doesn't mean that I still can't be Mormon and try to do both at the same time which also spectacularly did not work which then merged into being two people at the same time which did not work, which merged into being one person who was happy and not so much churchy, which is working so far.

While religious identity and sexual identity develop in concert, it needs to be remembered that these are two different, although potentially interconnecting, identities. Some women challenged one identity, which resulted in the subsequent threat to their other identity. Women who challenged their religious identity prior to questioning their sexual identity, however, did not experience the same level of conflict between their religious identity and sexual orientation. Some women may reject the religion and still struggle with sexuality. Cultural factors and internalized homophobia from a Mormon upbringing may also continue to impact the coming out process.

Because the majority of the women in this study grew up in the Mormon religion, they held this identity before they started questioning their sexuality. Since religious identity had already started to form, most women had to challenge this identity as the process of sexual identity formation began. It cannot be determined through this study whether sexual development hinders or interferes with spiritual development or visa

versa. It is clear that the identities play a part in interpreting and assigning meaning to experiences. While sexual identity and religious identity are two different constructs, the identity processes become conflated as women try to separate out falling in love, feelings of attractions, and religious beliefs often simultaneously.

Barbarella: Unfortunately it's kind of still painful for me. It's kind of one of those things that has super, super fucked me up and I don't think that it was because of being with a woman or me coming out, but I think that those heavy, heavy factors played into it. It was a lot because I came out, left my religion, and I fell in love all at the same time. And so I really had to work through separating those out because they're so, they're so related to her in my mind and in my heart. And so it's all 3 are very painful. Coming out is a painful topic. Religion is a painful topic. And then she's a painful topic.

As women sort out their identities and beliefs, most experience conflict. This conflict appears to stem from the ambivalence women feel toward both their identities. The pressure to choose and the subsequent consequences of that choice, including in the possible loss of family or loss of an intimate partnership, intensified the conflict. Many women felt forced to choose between people that they loved.

Chris: I'm never going to have love. It was the choice was if I want to be with my family forever and if I do that then I'm never going to, I'm going to be alone my whole life. That's what it was. I'm going to be alone. And I don't want to be alone. That's sad. And the Church is against it, against being gay. And so there's no answer.

Women reported that they based their choices on trying to do the right thing, as they defined it. The Mormon Church teaches that one can know "the right" based on how one feels. Women experienced confusion because they had come to believe that acting on same-sex sexuality is morally wrong and yet their same-sex feelings felt normal and right to them.

Rebecca: I don't know if I'm evil or not. I don't believe I am. I don't feel like an evil person. I come home and I love my children each and every day. I try to speak to them like I should, treat them with respect. I feel my husband deserves



someone else because he needs someone who can love him deeply, that's what I feel. But I don't know. It's hard. It's hard because you have the gospel telling you one thing and you have what you feel inside telling you another thing and it's just very difficult to know what to do.

Holly: I was getting more and more disillusioned from my beliefs...if this is so wrong why am I feeling this way? And how do you repent from love? How do you do that? Because I can't figure it out, I've tried really hard and we were really earnest. We wanted to be good Mormons, but it was just it's like telling any married person or committed person that you can't love them anymore and part of repentance is that you can't be with them anymore.

As women experience conflict between their religion and sexuality, religious beliefs tend to be dominant in the beginning and women try to adhere to religious beliefs. But then desire for intimacy or the reality of feelings towards a specific woman pulls one toward a same-sex relationship. Women receive pressure from their families, their communities, and society in general, which remains divisive regarding issues of spirituality and sexuality, to choose between their religion and their sexuality. Women received messages that they cannot be both lesbian and Mormon; they must choose only one aspect of their identity with which to define themselves. Holly points out that if one tries to fit into both, “you can't fit both, the Church doesn't let you.” As Daisy Jane seeks to develop a same-sex relationship, she experiences more pressure to make a choice because if she does not choose then the Church will choose for her in the form of excommunication. Much of the conflict that women face results from not wanting to make a choice between their identities.

Participants in previous research on this population have resisted this pressure to conform to one of two boxes (Brzezinski, 2000). The mental health profession has also begun advocating that individuals who experience conflict between the religious beliefs and sexuality integrate rather than polarize their identities (see the special edition about

depolarizing the debate in *The Counseling Psychologist* 2004, 32(5)). At least some women find a way to carve out space between the dichotomous options between identities. Because sexuality and spirituality represent two distinct constructs, women may develop a sexual minority identity and a Mormon identity.

Stargays: So that's what I hope people understand most is that it is entirely possible to have a strong testimony and still be gay, to identify as both. They're not mutually exclusive. They are in many respects, I think, independent of each other.

This does not discount the difficulty in being fully active in the Mormon religion while maintaining same-sex relationships. The Mormon Church's stance toward same-sex sexuality and their ability to punish those members who engage in the behavior makes balancing both identities hard. Some women try to balance by compartmentalizing their identities (Hunter, 2010). Hunter, however, theorizes that compartmentalization may be a transitional stage rather than a long-term solution due to difficulty of maintaining two separate lives. Several women found balancing too difficult and gave up the effort due to the need to be honest in all parts of their lives. This does not mean that the solution is for all women to abdicate their religious identity. Making a choice to either live within the moral dictates of the Mormon religion or to live in a same-sex relationship does not necessarily end the struggle women feel.

Andie: When you're faced with a dilemma like this, the Church versus the lifestyle, you know it's been a year and a half...that I've been living completely in the Church and not the lifestyle, but I think the more time passes the more I realize that it doesn't matter what choice you make there, you're going to struggle with it for the rest of your life. I mean even if I would, if I were in a relationship right now...it would be a struggle and I know that with my choice that I did make I am struggling. So I don't think it really, I wish that there were an easy way out, but there isn't. I think the struggle continues.

Some women choose to remain in the struggle. Stargays states she still experiences conflict between the two parts of herself while she attempts to balance these two sides of herself.

Stargays: Absolutely. All the time. Yeah all the time, I'd be lying if I said anything differently. Obviously the whole morality issue with being gay and living the gay lifestyle in the first place is just in the face of anything that I know to be of religious background, you know what I'm saying. And so the two of them there's always this inherent conflict between the two, but that doesn't mean that I would choose one over the other, I have to have both. Does that make sense? I mean, for me it's a way of balancing things out like I can't go down one path only because it's not who I am, it's not what is best for me.

How one reconciles identity represents a unique course through unique experiences (Hunter, 2010). Some women come out and maintain their religious identity, whether or not they remain active participants in the religion. Some women come out and dis-identify with their religious identity. Some women never come out because of the primacy of their religious identity. Some women dis-identify with the Mormon religion and then come out.

How do women choose which option is right for them? As stated previously, there is not one point of choice, but an on going process of considering different identities and figuring out which one fits. Women must find out for themselves what identity represents their authentic self. Reconciling is an active process that can be painful and confusing. And as Barbarella states, "you're never really done. Ever, ever, ever."

Many of the women felt drawn to both their Mormon identity and their identity as a sexual minority. They experienced dissonance because their personal actions did not align with their beliefs, the messages of the Church did not align with their feelings and experiences, or the actions of Church members did not align with the Church's teachings. Women must make meaning about why they experience a difference between what they

were taught to be and what they are. “Managing cognitive dissonance associated with religious and sexual identities takes time” (Hunter, 2010, p. 47).

Yarhouse and Burkett (2003) proponents of maintaining religious identity by curbing sexual behavior according to religious beliefs point to Fessinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance which states that it is easier to change beliefs and to maintain behaviors, then to change behavior and maintain beliefs. They point to this as the reason many people choose the course to identify with their sexual orientation. Women base sexual identity on several factors, only part of which is sexual orientation. Sexual identity is a self-label based on sexual orientation, behaviors, and beliefs (Yarhouse, 2001). For this reason, a woman may acknowledge a same-sex sexual orientation and not identify as a sexual minority. A few women held their religious identity as more important to their overall sense of self.

Bisexuality and sexual fluidity may also affect how a woman chooses to reconcile any conflict she may feel because of the potential to create a satisfying heterosexual relationship.

Samantha: In fact I have thought this before if the Church came out and said it's okay to be gay, I would probably be gay. But I'm making a choice not to be gay

Samantha also acknowledges that it might be easier for her to make this choice because she identifies as bisexual.

Samantha: And maybe I feel bad too because...I understand that I probably have more of a choice than someone who really just feels totally homosexual probably doesn't feel like they have a choice.

Most of the women in this study located their sexuality the far end of the spectrum towards exclusive homosexuality. They simply could not experience the deep connections and attractions toward men. Most women attempted to open themselves up

to the possibility of a heterosexual relationship, but it either never happened or could be satisfactorily maintained. Despite being open to heterosexual relationships, they tended to continue to fall in love with women. Relationships with men did not develop, but love and intimacy with women did.

Once a woman recognizes her same-sex attraction she must learn to accept it. She may not want this experience, but eventually she recognizes that she has to accept it because her sexual orientation does not change. Women may try to change their sexual orientation through prayer, religious activity, or they may simply try to ignore it. However, realizing they cannot change leads to reconciliation with their sexuality.

Reconciliation appears to be a process where women seek honesty, peace, and happiness. One of the first steps in this process involves understanding what it means to have same-sex attractions and accepting that it does not mean one is deviant. While reconciliation is a unique experience, similarities in the experience exist. All women must question and challenge their pre-existing religious beliefs. This does not mean giving up their belief system. They can still believe in the Mormon Church, but most changed beliefs about their same-sex sexuality made them inherently evil or changed their beliefs about God's acceptance and love. In order to understand sexuality, women sought information including getting to know other people who identify as LGB, knowing other lesbians and identifying with them leads to self-acceptance and coming out. Women strongly desired to know other women's stories and found personal healing in talking to others about their experiences; this may include formal counseling.

Changing beliefs can be freeing because women are no longer restrained by negative thoughts. Challenging beliefs is not easy and may take time before women are

to the point where they can challenge their beliefs. Part of this challenge involves separating spirituality from religion. The Mormon religion is all encompassing and women may need time and distance from their practice of the religion in order to be able to critically examine beliefs without being biased by engrained Mormon beliefs. Several women noted their fear of critically examining their beliefs lessened as they came to the belief that the religion was not true. Challenging beliefs may mean trading in certainty to accepting uncertainty.

Kathryn: I believe in a, certainly believe in a higher power whether that is God or, I'm not, I'm not clear on what that is but just that there is something out there. I think my beliefs are still in flux and honestly probably will be all my life and will change even more as experiences come through.

Critical support is essential in the process of reconciliation. Women who had no support had greater difficulty reconciling their beliefs with their sexuality. Most women had to develop support systems outside of the Mormon Church in order to obtain the supports that they needed.

One of the beliefs that women must challenge is their belief about God and the creation of sexuality. Interestingly, both the women and Boyd K Packer (2010), a high-ranking official in the LDS Church, made statements that a loving God would not make them incapable of loving someone of the opposite sex when that was a requirement for salvation. However, they came to contrasting conclusions. Packer argued that this meant that people are not inherently homosexual, while the women in this study argued that homosexuality is not morally wrong. Women must change the scripts about homosexuality that they learned as these scripts may contribute to their self-hatred or self-sabotage.

Aidan: I think I grew up with the feeling as a teenager that lesbians and gays can't be happy. They don't have happy lives. They can't be happy. They can't have a good relationship. I've seen how I've inadvertently reflected that in my relationships where something sabotages them, or I'm not choosing the right people, or I settle for flings rather than something better.

Because of the pain in their process, some women experience anger during the process of reconciliation. Women must face and release their anger. It appears that most women did not remain in an angry stage, but moved beyond to be able to objectively acknowledge both good and bad in the Church. Women may seek counseling to assist in the healing process. Therapy often involves self-acceptance.

### Acceptance

Women desire unconditional love based on acceptance as they are. Religious beliefs may interfere with acceptance. Self-acceptance is also a process that begins to occur when hiding or fighting against one's sexual orientation does not work. Women seek acceptance from their families, communities, God, and themselves. Family acceptance is a process, not an event. Most families must go through their own process of reconciliation. Community acceptance may mean building a new, accepting community when women do not feel accepted by their religious communities.

Regardless of others' acceptance, women place more import on their feelings of God's acceptance, if they continue to believe in God. Women want unconditional love from family and community, but eventually come to believe that God loves them unconditionally regardless of who they love and with whom they form intimate relationships. Finally, women must challenge their feelings of self-worth. Accepting self

is hard when one does not have social acceptance, but self-acceptance is more important. Accepting one's self may mean placing less import on acceptance from family.

### Resilience

Each of these women showed amazing resilience. Despite stories fraught with pain, they not only survived, they grew stronger. Their resilience shone through their determination to seek happiness rather than staying in pain. Resilience came from individual characteristics, such as humor, and outside critical support they received along their way. Women had different levels of acceptance toward their sexuality and varying beliefs about the LDS Church. Yet, all found the strength to keep trying, even those who previously attempted to take their own lives. Fortunately for these women, their attempts did not result in death. I cannot say whether or not these women are some how different from women who complete suicides. The only difference may be that the women in this study survived their attempts. Given the opportunity of one more day allowed them the time they needed to continue to engage in the reconciliation process. I recommend providing sources of support and acceptance as an intervention for those at-risk for suicide. This may be difficult given that women often suffer in silence. This means that the community needs to provide a space of safety instead of rejection.

Parker: What I do know is that people cannot understand the pain of it unless they experience it. That the pain of losing everything dear to you, and it changes and it evolves, the connections reconnect in different ways hopefully, not always as in the case of my brother but you know it's, I don't think about it much anymore. I don't go back to that space to remember and I'm lucky. My life came out the other end really beautifully and I had critical support, even though I had challenges and difficulties, I had critical support along the way.



### **Limitations**

This study does not represent all Mormon women who experience same-sex attractions. The women who volunteered for this study may be different from other Mormon women who have experienced same-sex sexuality and did not participate. I cannot say how representative the stories are to others. It is very likely that women chose to participate because they had come to a place of greater reconciliation and wanted to talk about their experiences. Woman who deny or hide their experience with same-sex sexuality would not be likely to volunteer for this type of study.

Although a small subset of this sample, I propose there are far more women similar to Samantha and Mel who can blend in with the heterosexual expectations of their religious culture. Samantha volunteered for this study because of a previously established relationship of trust that she had with this researcher.

Samantha: I have loved [my graduate] program and the self reflection that we get to do and think about things. I think I've learned a lot. I think without a doubt there's no way I could've come and talked to you if I hadn't gone through some of this self reflection.

I am also aware of heterosexually married women who identify as lesbian, but choose to remain with their husbands for whatever reason. Their voices are obviously missing from this sample. Future research should investigate how their heterosexual relationships differ from the relationships that the women in this sample had.

The sample in this study lacked a sufficient number of individuals who converted or belong to an ethnic minority. Their experiences may be different due to other intersecting identities. The data are based in retrospective accounts, which poses some limitations. I went to lengths to ensure trustworthiness such as member checking, but my perspective and experience impacted my interpretations.

This study provides an excellent in-depth discussion of some Mormon women's experiences with same-sex attractions which may resonant with other Mormon women with same-sex sexuality. Although it would be inappropriate to attempt to generalize these experiences to other women outside of this sample, one starts to understand the complexity of this phenomenon.

I believe that many of the themes can transfer to other situations. I explained to my divorced, heterosexual, Catholic friend how the women in this study had their worldviews shaken and had to recreate meaning for their lives since they did not conform to the script they were given. My friend exclaimed how she too had this experience having believed that life followed the path of marriage and children, yet now divorced and without kids she too had to create new meaning for her life.

### **Future Research**

Given the impact of family on this phenomenon, research needs to study how families reconcile their beliefs with their feelings for a family member who experiences same-sex sexuality. Future research should also continue to examine this phenomenon by including larger samples of minorities, converts, and transgendered individuals. More in-depth research regarding religious individuals' heterosexual experiences with sexuality could shed further light on the intersection of sexuality and religious identity. Research should also look into other tightly knit religious communities. Research could also examine children's processes when their parents come out and if there is a difference between young children and adult children. In addition, studies need to examine how

communities create an atmosphere of greater inclusiveness given how critical the cultural atmosphere is to mental health.

### **Ethics Revisited**

I have felt honored that these women have shared their stories with me. Through this research project, I have gained a sense of obligation to these women to share their stories, and my work, for the benefit of other women in the process of understanding their own identities and for the Mormon community—which needs greater understanding of this phenomenon in order to provide the compassion and support women need. I attempted to present their stories accurately and to show acceptance without judgment for their choices. The women who participated hold different religious and sexual identities. Some women believe and practice the LDS religion and other women no longer hold those beliefs. I attempted to maintain an atmosphere of respect as I analyzed these emotional and difficult topics and to respect the beliefs and journeys of each individual. Each woman in her interview expressed her desire to help the greater community come to a better understanding and empathy for those who experience a struggle at some point in their lives because of their sexuality and their religious identity. My hope is that this project will help facilitate the larger discussions starting to occur within our communities.

Women described their experience of sharing their stories for this research as “cathartic,” “a good experience,” and “a healing experience to be able to have this conversation.” Women appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences given the silence that surround it in so much of their lives.

Jessica: I really enjoyed having the opportunity to talk about it. I felt a lot more confident. Because I feel like my religion had always been like this issue, like

this big elephant in the room that I have never really known how to discuss or even think about like personally so I appreciated you asking such you know such direct questions about it.

Near the end of my interview with Samantha, she paused and asked if I intended to use the information that I obtained from these interviews to slander the Church. I explained that I hold the Mormon Church with respect and only held the desire to understand this phenomenon and to help the community. I no longer profess to know truth. At this point in my life, I am comfortable with not knowing. I believe that there is value in all manners of reconciliation and validity in the choices that women make as right for their lives.

Ellen called me the day after our second interview to clarify how the information she shared would be presented due to concern about names or situations being identified in the tight knit Utah lesbian community. I explained confidentiality and how any identifying information would be altered. I informed her that she would have the opportunity to approve her story for the final paper. When returning her draft with feedback, she expressed appreciation for the opportunity to review how I retold her story.

After distributing the stories to the participants, Jessica asked that I remove reference to her specific disability. Given the small size of the disability community in which she participated, she believed that this fact would identify her. Her disability provides interesting insight into the nature of attraction and may be instrumental in fully understanding her experience, but her right to confidentiality remains forefront.

Another ethical issue came from dual relationships that I held with a few of the women who also participated in a Mormon lesbian Internet chat site. I actively participated in that discussion group during this research process and the women who

belonged to this group greater access to my personal life. A few women connected with me through the social media site Facebook. Had these women been clients, I would have maintained strict clinical boundaries. I had to process the difference between my research and clinical boundaries. Being a qualitative, feminist researcher, I do not hold the value of sterile objectivity pursued by quantitative research. Given that they had opened themselves up to me, it felt exploitative to hide certain parts of myself with select participants and not others. In this vein, I answered any questions that any woman had about my experience with same-sex sexuality and the Mormon Church.

### **Implications for Counselors**

Clinicians need to be willing to challenge their own faith and beliefs. This includes critically examining any negative beliefs about the Mormon Church that a non-Mormon counselor may hold. Mormon counselors working with Mormon clients need to realize that the right answer for their client is not always the religious answer that a counselor holds from their personal beliefs. Counselors need to be willing to challenge beliefs with the client. At the same time, clinicians need to assess whether or not a client is ready to challenge their beliefs.

Quinn: My therapist is LDS, she has a gay son, a gay dad, and a gay ex-husband. And she has been fantastic. And she said most people in the Church they just don't want to re-examine their faith.

That does not mean that clinicians have to give up their personal beliefs, but recognize that their personal beliefs cannot be forced onto another person. Many women want a counselor who understands their cultural background and the Mormon religion. Some women specifically choose not to see an LDS counselor due to their concern of

having those beliefs pushed on them. Start where the client is at and do not pressure her toward a specific direction. Remember the client's the right to determine goals.

Samantha: I also went to therapy right after Tom and Jerry started dating. I really went through this depression and I went to see a therapist. And I talked about these, and I specifically picked... I picked a therapist who is not LDS and I know she, that intrigued her like I specifically wanted a non-LDS therapist. I wasn't ready to accept that I was having some homosexual feelings, but she went there with me when I told her how much I admired my Spanish, my music teacher. Cause I had said the word admired and she's like you were in love with them. And I'm like uh I was not in love, I thought she went a little too far you know. And the other thing is that I really, really wanted to work on stopping masturbation. And she's like well how frequently do you do it? I'm like probably once a month or every 2 months or something. And she's like that's not bad. She's like that's not, your fine. I'm like no you don't understand I, this is part of my religion and my belief, I really don't want to do this. And she just would not go there with me. So I ended up not continuing therapy with her and I haven't ever been back. But anyway some of those things that she said did stick with me where I thought maybe I really, maybe, maybe I'm not a totally, total freak that there is a reason that I do find myself you know I don't know attracted to certain women or whatever.

It is important to have knowledge about same-sex sexuality in addition to knowledge about the pressures, beliefs, and vernacular of the Mormon Church.

Irene: well I've had various therapists over the years. A woman that I saw for I think for 4 years or so I just got her by happenstance. She was raised LDS, no longer active. But that was important to me that she understand the pressures of the Church and understand the vernacular with which I would describe my upbringing and also just have some first-hand knowledge of, of growing up LDS. What she didn't have that I'd wish that...she'd understood same-sex attractions issues and some of those things because that was foreign to her. So we were kind of learning together...I've been seeing a [different therapist] just for the past few months. I sought her out wanting someone that has an LDS background and that has experience dealing with homosexuality...She is not active in the Church, but she grew up LDS and she's also got that same background and she understands, she's done a lot of work with gay individuals and so her, her expertise is amazing. So yeah go in there, I learn something every time we go. It's been really helpful.

Counselors should not send messages that people who experience same-sex attractions have been sexually abused or are somehow defective. Research does not support this (Friedman & Morgan, 2009). This message causes women to feel alienated

or provokes confusion, causing a delay in identity formation. Do not force your belief about reasons for sexuality on another. Honor their experience.

Nicole: And I just recently got a new therapist who is a LGBT affirming because my previous one was not at all and she, it just felt like she was making me feel very invalidated. But this new therapist she's kind of given me resources.

Work may need to center on self-love and self-acceptance. Most women experienced a negative impact on their self-worth. Clients may believe that they are horrible. Clinicians should foster self-esteem.

Irene: Going back to finding those patterns that have reinforced negative thinking and then start over.

Help clients separate out the different factors at play: current relationship, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and religious beliefs. These different constructs tend to get tangled together. Counselors need to help their clients consider potential consequences of coming out to their family as possible rejection may be detrimental. Help clients find resources. Be careful in where to direct someone to go for information to understand sexuality because some information is helpful and others can produce harm.

Quinn: And she has given me great reading material. I mean I've read "No More Goodbyes" by Carol Lynn Pearson. I've read a "Peculiar People: Mormons and same-sex attractions." I mean cover to cover both of these. And I still continue to anything I can get my hands on to try to help educate my family as well myself in being able to explain how I feel in an articulate way I'm doing.

What if a client requests reparative therapy? It would be a counselor's duty to discuss the limitations and potential negative consequences of this type of therapy. Professional mental health organizations strongly recommended that counselors do not engage in this type of therapy, rather affirmative therapy should be employed (APA, 2009). If the client holds goals to remain celibate and practice religious beliefs, then it is

a counselor's duty as to help them towards those goals without promising unrealistic outcomes.

Daisy Jane: I just had one thought...about the, the approach to try to change me. To me that was, to me that is what represents like a sexual lobotomy and so to me it's completely immoral and the approach is immoral and I've never had an opportunity to voice that so that's why I'm telling you. I just think it is such an immoral approach and that's why I don't agree with Evergreen tactics and I know that we are coming a long ways as a society and I appreciate that and that's why wanted to participate in this, but I think that trying to change someone sexuality or to talk them out is such a violation. I only feel that way because I feel that way, I have experienced the feeling.

Referring women to group counseling may be beneficial because of the normalization they can experience in a group.

Irene: I just felt like it was nice to not be alone. My individual therapy has been fantastic. I've felt my therapist is great and I think she has done a great job of helping me to accept myself and she's been supportive, but I think to hear other people say the things that I've only felt and to experience that vicariously through them and to understand that I'm not alone that's been phenomenal. That's been incredible for me...it was a bonding experience, but I thought that it was therapeutic as well. So loved it. Surprisingly.

### **Implications for Social Supports**

While women who experience same-sex sexuality represent a minority, their lives touch many others. There are specific things that people can do to help someone who experiences conflict between their sexual and religious identity. Be a critical support. Maintain friendships. Be supportive and encouraging. Be a connection between the woman who expresses same-sex sexuality and her family members who may be rejecting. Provide support to family members who are struggling with their feeling about same-sex sexuality. Recognize the pain that a rejecting community can inflict. Be willing to have conversations and talk about sexuality.



Chris: I hate the way they are with gay people. I don't think they know how bad they hurt us. And that's where...people have to stand up and talk about it a lot more.

Social supports may hold to their own values and beliefs without forcing them on someone else.

Parker: If it's something you don't believe in, then don't choose it. Don't do it. I'm all for that. You know have your standards, have your beliefs and I will support you in those, but don't apply them to me, don't.

Do not judge. Women in study emphasized their belief that Christ taught love and that He should be the only judge. They called on others to show love. One way to do this is through recognizing and reducing inconsistencies between what is professed and what is enacted.

Aidan: One of my friends he says oh no I love you, but I wouldn't ever support you or condone you in doing this...I'm like how can you be a Christian and say things like this to me? How can you honestly think that you are being a Christian? And he like other people thinks that he is being Christian because he's standing up for his beliefs. Well I keep trying to point out that there is a higher belief. Christ actually says don't judge. And Christ actually says love and be compassionate, don't throw the first stone, don't throw any stones, just let me be the judge. It's not your job; it's not your business.

Create an atmosphere of acceptance, regardless of choices.

Andie: There needs to be a message out there whether people continue to live the gay lifestyle or whether they come back into the Church. They need to know that they are love and they are accepted.

### **Implications for Families**

Show your love, regardless of your values about same-sex sexuality.

Andie: As a parent you may be sad at the choices your child makes, but you don't stop loving your child. You may want them to take a different route, but then again it's like somebody having downs-syndrome. You can't change what they are. They are what they are and you love them any way.

Don't judge. Don't reject. Attempt to find understanding. Seek resources and be open to different perspectives. For example, Farah tried to help her father understand by giving him a book about other families who have come out to support their LGBT children.

Farah: [My father said], "I read the book you gave me. I can really understand where they are coming from, but I live a higher law. The law that God has given me is higher than what those people in that book are living with." And I didn't have the scope of knowledge or experience yet to be able to come back at him with any of this crap that he was saying to me. Your higher law means that you don't have compassion and forgiveness for your own children? What would Jesus do doesn't mean anything to you? Who was Jesus eating with? The people that were called sinners, but I don't think I'm a sinner, but if you think that I am a sinner am I not the one you should be sitting down with? I didn't have all that. My, I said what's wrong with being with someone you love? And he said well there are temptations we have in our life that we have to overcome. And he named off one or two of his, which were, they were serious temptations and things to overcome, but they weren't the same as this is the person I love with all my heart and have been in denial about for 10 years.

Barbarella: [I] had a really good conversation with my sister where I've felt like she could really hear me for the first time and was not defensive about her own religion. And I just said that to her, that it's hard having a conversation with you because I feel like it's really easy for you to get defensive about the Mormon and that it feels sort of like I'm attacking the religion when I'm really just asking you to kind of look and see how it might affect me personally. It being the religious dogma. I felt like she actually really heard me and she was really validating because she said, you know I have to be honest like I've never known you to be happier than you are now. And that was super, super validating because I do think the natural or sort of knee jerk reaction of Mormons if you ever sort of disclose any sort of loneliness or unhappiness or fleeting sadness is that that's sort of what you deserve and of course you'll be unhappy because this is the life that you've chosen. And I said that to my sister and she was sort of aghast by that because she 100% identified with that and admitted that she certainly had felt that way.

Find a way to accept and show love because family disapproval can literally be a life or death matter. Knowing that family love them "even above and besides being gay" may make the difference between a family member trying to take her own life.

Chris: So at the time I wanted to die and it was interesting because one of my ex-girlfriends had told my mom straight up...and she said 'would you rather your daughter be gay or dead?' And my mom's like well gay of course.

Family does not have to choose between a family member with same-sex sexuality and their religious beliefs.

Quinn: And that's what I'm trying to explain to my family, it's not an either/or. It is not the Church or me. You can still have the Church and me.

Be kind in the demonstration of beliefs. One of the primary teachings of the Mormon Church is to love others and not to judge. Parents who express strong disapproval in the form of disgust, contempt, or other such negative reactions damage their relationships with their children. Just like their child, they too must learn to balance religious beliefs with the love they have for another person.

Parker: My dad is very, very sweet. He's very warm with Sara and he doesn't agree with that and he has that, but on the other hand he's also a very kind person so he's like well then I'll support you, I don't agree with it but I'll be, I don't know the word to use...kind.

There are some who express concern that showing love to a family member who experiences same-sex sexuality will implicitly endorse the behavior. This does not seem to be the case. Women's whose families reacted most negatively appeared more likely to stop believing in the Church because of the negative experiences that became associated with the religion and their family's reactions. Andie, the only woman who returned to Church activity after living in a same-sex relationship, had experienced unwavering support from her family toward her and her relationships. Andie made her own choice to return based on her beliefs. Her family surrounded her with love regardless of her choices.

Parents and religion get tied together in children's heads. A parent who appears unloving and rejecting may affect how a woman sees the Church. Be an example of beliefs. Trying to force one's beliefs on a family member results in pain and decreased communication. Forcing family members to choose between the family and their romantic partners will create resentment and may drive that family member farther away.

Ellen: I broke up with [my first girlfriend] because my brother said I could never see my nephew again and that broke me. It tore me apart. And so I said okay my family is more important than this relationship. I will do whatever it takes to be with them, to be with the family, to love the family, to see my nephew grow up. And so eventually I realized...and it was really upsetting to me that their love was conditional. It felt like the only way that they would love me and allow me into their homes and minds and hearts was if I prescribed to whatever it was that they wanted me to be. And so I started developing a lot of anger and resentment toward all of my family.

Family members go through their own process of understanding and reconciliation. Find ways to accept women with same-sex sexuality, even if you do not accept their choices.

Ellen: I have friends who are gay who have Mormon families who didn't act anything like mine, who are a hundred percent accepting, who are Mormons, who are upset with the Church. So there are good Mormon people out there. I just wish that they would speak out more and be more vocal because there are families like mine who could really benefit from families who view their gay children in such a different light.

### **Implication for Ecclesiastical Leaders**

Andie: We're taught and in the scriptures...[that] men will make mistakes. That happens. They don't know how to deal with this, but maybe somebody will help them learn.

Women had a variety of experiences with their ecclesiastical leaders. Some bishops reacted with love and kindness. Others caused further pain and alienation. Seek to understand and be willing to just listen.

Help provide resources. Church leaders willingly provide financial assistance for an individual to seek counseling from an LDS therapist, but withdraw that support if a woman wants to see a therapist who affirms her sexual orientation. This presents an issue for those with low income and/or no health insurance.

Many individual members hold negative beliefs about same-sex sexuality due to ignorance and misunderstanding. Become educated and teach congregations appropriately.

Aidan: I think the Church has done a disservice to us, to people such as me because...homosexuality either wasn't talked about or what it was it was always in a derogatory sense.

Andie: There are people in the Church, just like there are people in general society, that just don't understand it. They don't get it. And there is a lot of ignorance and there's a lot of ignorance in the Church. And those people who are ignorant in the Church I think...[that is] something that they are going to have to work on for themselves because they are missing part of the gospel message.

Members may feel confused about how to respond to sexual minorities and from messages they receive may believe that they are supposed to be homophobic.

Stargays: I actually used to be very homophobic because I thought that was what you were supposed to do. I thought that was what being a good Mormon was all about was that you were very prejudiced in a sense against people who didn't believe what you believed.

Talk about these issues in your congregations. There are people suffering who need to be reached out with love and companionship. Foster an atmosphere of love, acceptance, and inclusion. Teach members to simply show love.

Daisy Jane: And I know we need to. And I know I needed a friend like me when I was 20 years old. I need someone like me to talk to. And I know that we've got to do better. And we're taking baby, little baby steps. I mean my bishop knows that I'm gay and teaching Gospel doctrine and I'm a facilitator in the 12-step program. That's a baby step.

Do not push women toward dating or excommunication. Church discipline courts do not help women feel loved.

Quinn: I think if the Church had responded with you know there's a very good possibility that you are, that you are gay and that we may not understand all the reasons that you are, but how can we help you. I think if I had been met with that kind of open arms let me try and help you if there's a way to help you or help you understand this and be kind about it as opposed to you're not gay, you're a sinner. I mean anybody, I don't think anybody responds to that kind of behavior and that kind of attitude and it's just, I remember listening to President Packer when he spoke in conference about gays and I remember being super offended. And I was not out at the time.

When the Church withdraws all support for individuals who do not conform to heterosexual expectations, it can leave them without any moral compass.

Chris: Ok don't let us get married in the Temple. I get that. I totally get that. But I would like the Church to say that civil unions equal an acceptable couple because that right there would give, would have given me as a younger kid a goal to shoot for. Ok when I find my girlfriend, when I find the right woman, I can marry her or have this civil union and I can still be an upstanding member of the ward and not be judged. I don't think that is ever going to happen. But I would like them to say it's ok to have a girlfriend and be in a monogamous relationship...even if the Church would...at least say that you know what there are gay people and there are straight people. At least acknowledge that.

Most individuals want more than anything to feel accepted by the Church and in their congregations. They are painfully aware that they are not. This fact only drives them away from Church activity.

Stargays: An ideal relationship with the Church would be where we would be allowed to be full members of the Church while being in a relationship with a same-sex partner. I know that causes a lot of people hives, but for me that would be it. If I could take my wife or my partner to church and we would be fully accepted by the other people there and we could participate and nobody would look at us like we were child molesters. I mean to me that would be the idea of...what perfection on earth to me would be. Never going to happen in my lifetime. But you know a girl can dream. That would be, that would be my hope.

As individuals come to counsel about their sexuality, do not be dismissive. Even if she has not acted on her same-sex sexuality, the feelings that she has can create a crisis

of faith and identity. Telling women that the behavior is sin and to repent does not help. Take into account their feelings. While ecclesiastical leaders may not change their stance about the morality of same-sex behavior, how they respond to it makes a difference in how women feel about the Mormon Church and influences their desires to remain part of the Church.

Farah: We went to the bishop who was actually phenomenal. I mean there are a million things he could've said that would have torn us to pieces and he didn't. He said 'clearly you love each other. And you want what's best for each other and I'm not going to say that you can't live together or get on with your lives, but now I'm kind of in on it so I'm going to be checking in on you and you just need to get things on track.' Bless him. So he also went to bat with the stake president on our behalf, we didn't have to go through any kind of a council or anything that was the ultimate horror that we could think of. And just every Sunday shake our hands and just kind of look us in the eye and make sure that things were going the way we all thought it should be within the context of the Church. That went on for 3 years. We said that we gave each other up for God...After that 3 years we actually went back and sat with him to thank him for giving us the opportunity to really live the gospel to its fullest and not have all those other horrible things like people wanting to know how many fingers you used or that you're not allowed to be together and you're a sinner. None of those things came into that experience. He gave us an opportunity to have a peaceful just figure it out. And this is what we figured out, we were going to be together.

Chris: And so when I talked to the bishop through a lot, he was my bishop through the anxiety attacks and the suicidal thoughts. And he was super loving, super loving, and he never ever, ever was condescending or he would be understanding. He would just listen. And even though I was quote sinning, he was always opening his arms to me like well you need to do what you need to do. Later his son got home from his mission and immediately came out of the closet. And so the bishop and his wife had me over for dinner and they were like, 'Thank you so much for being a part of our lives while you were going through this because we' they completely opened their arms to their son and they said go find a good man and be happy. And they thanked me so much because they were like we watched what you went through. Cause my mother has never said that ever. Ever. She will never say that. So when, when they saw what I went through I think it helped them deal with their son.

Be aware that wielding your authority over a Church member in an attempt to control their choices may be seen as religious abuse.

Parker: I had a bishop tell me that...the doctrine that children are basically sealed to the priesthood and if I'm not in the Church, I'm not connected to that and Tessa isn't connected to me. And I think, I think that well that conversation made leaving doable because...how anyone could be that incredulous. How anyone could assume a space to tell me what my relationship would ever be with my daughter was just wow.

Families who have members with same-sex attractions will also seek counsel from their ecclesiastical leaders. Families may feel forced into a position where they believe that they have to choose between the LDS Church and their religious beliefs and someone that they love.

Farah: And if anything, that's what I'm most angry with the Church about. That they put families in this position that there's no way to cope with it.

Encourage families to love and accept their family member. Rejecting their family because of same-sex sexuality will only divide the family. Coming together, not pushing a family member out, strengthens families. This is also true of ward families. Encourage ward members to love, accept, and welcome all people.

Daisy Jane: But for me it's peace finally. For me, it's coming to terms with who I am, and that's that I'm an active member of the Church. I love my Church and my religion and I have faith in my Church and the people of my Church. I believe that they can do better. I believe that they can be more understanding and kinder and more accepting and I want to believe in them. And I do. I just know that we can do better than what were doing.

### **Implications for Women Who Experience Same-Sex Sexuality**

Andie: I learned for myself and I respect any person's decision what they decide and what path they decide to follow. I respect it. Anybody involved with the Church and that identifies as a lesbian God love them they are awesome.

How do you personally reconcile the conflict that you experience? There is no one path. My advice (and there will be lots of advice coming from different directions):



trust yourself. Do what feels right for you. Everything else I offer is guidance that may or may not be applicable to you individually.

Reconciliation is a process, which often involves a lot of research, prayer, and consideration. It involves becoming open to yourself. You will need to engage in self-reflection and soul searching. While the LDS Church spells out a specific path that every person should take, everyone's journey is unique. Everyone has a unique experience and there is no standard "prototypical lesbian script." Honor that process, even though at times it is excruciatingly difficult. You may weave in and out of the process through various times in your life as you seek understanding. Mistakes will be made, but that is part of the learning process.

Quinn: Because it's hard to explain it. I mean it's hard, my ex[-husband] I keep telling him over and over I wasn't lying. I wasn't a fraud. I just wasn't ready to accept my identity yet. It's a process of acceptance and discovery it's not, I didn't make the choice one day to be gay. I truly believe that I was made this way. I didn't chose. I didn't wake up one day and say today I think I'm going to be attracted to women. It's not like today I'm going to wear these pair of blue jeans. It's not the same thing.

Stargays: There's certain things that I would like to change and certain things I would like to do different and I can't. I have to say in all honesty there are things that I seriously regret, but at the same time I have those regrets because I simply didn't know any better. So I couldn't have done any better because I didn't have the knowledge that I needed at the time to do better, but I still have regret.

Aidan: But I think for some people like me they don't learn the way other people learn and because of what I went through as a kid I wasn't going to learn certain things because I wasn't going to learn things the traditional Mormon way, just stay out of temptation, don't let temptation. I'm not going to learn like that because it never takes into account, for me at least, it never took into account my real feelings and my real needs. It never took into account the fact that I had been through so much already.

Accept yourself as you are. Do not allow other's negative views to be internalized. Accept even imperfection. The Mormon Church sends the message that

one must constantly strive toward perfection. Many people interpret perfection as following every rule that the Mormon Church sets out. Many women hold the false belief that “if I am just perfect enough” then the same-sex feelings will go away. This is a fallacy. Having same-sex feeling does not make you imperfect and sexual orientation is unlikely to change. Believe in your inherent goodness. Own your sexuality. Live for yourself and not according to others expectations because you cannot live your life for someone else.

Olivia: And I’m realizing that my sexuality is something for me. It’s my own business and I spent so long, especially in my formative years figuring that my sexuality was something for somebody else. Like it was a presentation, it was, it was nice for me, but mostly it was just to make sure that other people knew I was normal.

Engage in self-compassion and self-love. Regardless of your actions or choices, believe in a loving deity. Build your individual relationship with God. We begin to think that God hates us because everyone else seems to hate us. If God is a god of love, then He loves us unconditionally.

Samantha: I think I was 14 or 15, I had a problem. I started masturbating. And that made me really sick to my, just what I was doing I felt was super wrong too. And I remember praying one night just asking the Lord to forgive me and help me to not do this. And I just felt like a horrible, no good, terrible rotten person and I heard a voice say, ‘Samantha, you’re good person.’ And I was like oh.

Honor what feels right to you. Holding on to what feels right and believing in your feelings allows healing.

Rebecca: I feel like I was faking it all my life. I’m tired of faking my life. I’m tired of trying to please everybody. I read a quote the other day, “The moment you start pleasing others, that’s the moment you are going to fail.” So if I can start focusing on pleasing myself and doing the best that I know I can do, then I think maybe I can grow from there.

Kathryn: Anytime I was spending time with her whether it was sexually or not all those fears [about her actions being evil] they all went away. And I think it's that,

that I kind of held onto as I kind of went down my path of recovery is that, that comfort of knowing that that felt right. That when we were together that it just felt right. And it was that that I kept turning back to and saying you know that really does just feel like me. I feel like I'm authentically me when I'm with her and it was that yeah it really was a catalyst to kind of help me down my path.

Ellen: There was always talk of we can't, we can't continue this. This isn't right. This isn't okay. God doesn't want this to happen and what not until finally I think we both just like accepted that it wasn't right by the Church's standards, but it felt right for us.

Seek material and information. Some information is helpful and some information is potentially harmful. While Church members often first seek out LDS publications regarding same-sex sexuality, these publications seem to result in increased negative feelings.

Jessica: I actually went on the website [lds.org] as well when my mom she asked me to go on there and read articles about homosexuality like she's like go look in the New Era, go look and read and they'll teach you. I'm like what magazine is going to sway me back into been straight, whatever you say. And I tried to read them and it just made me feel, I felt like dirty and like sick and like there was something wrong with me.

Take it one day at a time whether that means staying in the Mormon Church as a practicing member or choosing to leave the Church.

Farah: We just lived a day at a time and it got easier and easier because I was no longer being bombarded with the you have to do it this way or you're not good enough because I wasn't going to church anymore...In leaving I didn't have this huge aching (gasp) where did my faith go? It was so comfortable to step out of that suit, which when I finally allowed myself to think about it was kind of surprising considering I was so good at it. You think I would have been aching and thrashing over that but instead it was such a relief, just to finally be able to love someone the way that I really felt in my heart and have nobody else judge it.

Consider your boundaries. Choosing to act on your same-sex sexuality does not mean that you have to give up all your moral beliefs. Many people have a tendency to swing to the opposite extreme from the religious lives they had been living. Maintain your values. Define healthy boundaries. Many women start with experimenting with an

identity, before fully engaging in sexual activity. Developing healthy relationships can be difficult because of the lack of community support, but that does not mean that you do not deserve healthy relationships.

Build community outside of the Mormon Church. Recognize that there is not a pre-established lesbian community that you can step into like you can a Mormon ward. You must build your community by forging individual relationships one at a time. Seek the community and support that you need.

Critically examine your own beliefs. What beliefs do you hold? Do you personally identify with these beliefs or do you hold them because they are what you have been taught? You may have been told not to question, that questioning shows lack of faith. But what are we afraid of? We are afraid of the Truth. If we critically analyze our beliefs, we might realize that there are parts of the religion that we do not truly believe or we might realize that there are parts we do believe, but do not live. One can either attempt to gain a testimony about that principle or can acknowledge that a belief system does not have to be all or nothing. Challenge black-and-white thinking.

Accepting your sexual orientation does not have to mean giving up your religion. Your choices are valid, whether or not you choose to remain a practicing member of the Church. Many women accept their sexuality and choose to practice celibacy for religious reasons.

Andie: For me, I have to keep an eternal perspective. If I don't, then I start to slide a little bit. And realize that this is just a short temporary period of time and that if I bid my time living what I know to be right for me then the life after will be much greater.

Some women do not choose to leave the Church, but are forced out through excommunication. Whether or not to leave or force the Church to act, depends on individual conscience.

Parker: I wanted the decision to be mine. I wanted to be the person who, and I respect other people who force the excommunication process because I think that's important too. I do. But in my own case I wanted to be the person who took the action and made the decision because too many times my own power had been more or less taken from me.

Quinn: I so wish one of two things would have happened that I had been a) better educated going into my court about defending myself in an articulate way or that b) I'd just never gone because it was horrible. It was horrible. I would never wish it on anyone, there was nothing godlike about it. I honestly don't understand why the Church felt the need to do it. I mean I know that they see it as you know this is the way back to repent and you can join the Church again in a year, but the things that they've put in the letter of excommunication are horrible.

The process is not easy and may take years to come to a resolution. To support the process, many women sought counseling. The choice of whether or not to have an LDS therapist depends on the openness of the therapist and the therapist's willingness to critically challenge their own beliefs. Seek a therapist who understands the complexity of religious identity and sexual orientation and who does not have an agenda in regards to your choices.

Recognize that your family is also going through a process. They may have negative reactions just like you might have had about your self. Families may have a hard time and struggle with acceptance. Provide your family with the love and compassion you want them to show you. They too need to go through the process of reconciling their beliefs with feelings toward someone they love in order to provide acceptance. In their struggle, they may do or say some things that are very hurtful. Practice forgiveness. Most strive to love to the best of their ability and may change their

beliefs and interactions with you as they grow through different experiences. Many women tried to their lives for their families, but this seems an unsuccessful strategy.

Nicole: We had a family get-together and there was a lot of tension in the room. And I was just like maybe I should just stay closeted, maybe I should just not do anything about this. But then I thought I can't. I can't suppress this any longer it's suffocating me. It's eating me up inside and I need to do something for myself instead of always trying to please the other person.

Talk about your feelings and experiences. Keeping it hidden creates feelings of isolation and may contribute to suicidal thoughts. Know that you are not alone in this experience. Tell your story. In order to change the atmosphere of shame and rejection, we need to be willing to have difficult conversations with our families and communities.

Andie: Because I think more people need to learn. I think more education needs to go on...even if I can help one teen not attempt suicide, then it would have been successful...It's just sharing the experience.

### **Conclusion**

How Mormon women experience same-sex sexuality depends on the degree to which they identify with their religion, their family's support or lack thereof, and the atmosphere of community acceptance or rejection. Developing a sexual identity is a distinct process from development of religious identity, although the interaction affects the developmental course. Negative experiences may affect mental health. In the end, however, it appears that women strive toward honesty, authenticity, and happiness.

## APPENDIX A

### **PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT ANNOUNCEMENT**

Seeking volunteers to participate in a study looking at Mormon women's experiences with same-sex sexuality. Criteria for participation:

- Women over the age of 18,
- Who are or have been a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and
- Who have experienced same-sex sexuality (thoughts, feelings, attractions, behaviors, affections, and/or relationships).

Eligible participants may currently hold any religious or sexual identity. Seeking women who hold various identities (Mormon, ex-Mormon, Lesbian/Gay, Queer, Bisexual, Heterosexual, etc.) in order to represent the diversity of experiences and outcomes.

The goal of this study is to understand and describe the experience of same-sexuality when it conflicts with religious identity.

Participants will be asked to:

- Take part in an initial 1-1.5 hour audio-recorded interview about your experiences as a Mormon woman with same-sex sexuality. Interviews can be in-person, by phone or Internet (i.e., Skype).
- Participate in 1/2-hour follow-up phone interview.
- Join an online discussion group with the other study participants to provide feedback on results. (Online participation is optional and not required in order to participate in interview portion of the study)

Participation is voluntarily and participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

The researcher is a PhD candidate at the University of Utah's College of Social Work and is conducting this research for her dissertation. Research may also be used for future publications. The researcher was actively raised in the Mormon religion and currently identifies as Lesbian. She is seeking to collaborate with other Mormon women who have experienced same-sex sexuality in understanding this experience and how women reconcile their sexual and religious identities.

For further information or to volunteer to participate in the study please contact Jeanna Jacobsen at [jeanna.jacobsen@utah.edu](mailto:jeanna.jacobsen@utah.edu) or 801-842-2519.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographics:

Pseudonym

DOB

Sexual Identity

Religious Identity

Gender

Relationship Status

Race/Ethnicity

1. Tell me about your experiences with same-sex sexuality.
2. Religiosity and Spirituality
  - a. How do you define religion and spirituality?
    - i. Has your definition changed?
  - b. Religion
    - i. Tell me about your involvement with the Mormon religion.
      1. How important was church involvement to you?
      2. How important was church involvement to your family?
    - ii. What are your family's or close social support current religious affiliation and/or practice?
  - c. Spirituality
    - i. Describe your relationship to God (or a higher power however that is defined)?
  - d. What role does religion and spirituality play in your life?
    - i. Has that changed?
3. Sexuality
  - a. What general views do you have about sex and sexuality?
  - b. How do you feel about your sexuality or sexual identity?
    - i. Has that changed?
  - c. Tell me about your sexual history.
4. Interaction between religious identity and sexuality



- a. In what ways do your religious beliefs and practices impact your sexual identity? (In what ways do they guide your life? In what ways do your beliefs influence your actions?)
  - b. Have you experienced conflicts between these two identities?
    - i. How did you or how have you tried to reconcile these feelings?
- 5. Is there anything else I should know or ask?

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